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Commentary

Hindu Nationalism, Gurus and Media

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Abstract: This commentary offers a reflection on the triangular interactive relationship between Hindutva, gurus and media. It suggests that Hindu nationalists understand gurus to be a specific form of valued Hindu cultural good, which helps to explain mediatised activist attempts to defend gurus from legal and media scrutiny, and historicises the theme of guru domination, caste politics and Hindutva through the optics of matter and media, exploring both the mass remediation of Brahmanical guruship models that attended Hindutva's rise in the 1990s and the oppositional response it provoked, which we term 'the subaltern counter-publicity of the guru'. It discloses how Hindutva is itself structurally composed of guru logics at different scales; it embodies a kind of 'fractal guruship'. However, if Hindutva mediates principles of guruship, we also see how a multitude of public gurus mediates principles of Hindutva. This 'bi-instrumentalism' of Hindu nationalism and some gurus is witnessed in the instances we describe of gurus—and the idea of India as a guru—being used as a means of branding in order to convey and normalise the 'Hindutva idea of India'. We suggest, in light of the frequent mutual mediation of gurus and Hindutva, that continued investment by devotees and commentators in gurus as figures embodying hope and the promise of post-communal amity can aptly be described using Berlant's evocative phrase 'cruel optimism'.

Keywords: guru; guruship; Hinduism; Hindu nationalism; Hindutva; media; material culture; fractal guruship; more-than-guru

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1. Introduction

Gurus and their organisations are among the most socially, politically and economically significant individuals and institutions in South Asia. However, they are also perhaps the least well understood. In recent decades, public-facing gurus have had a substantial impact on the growth of Hindu nationalism—the ideology which underpins the current ruling political force in India, the Bharatiya Janata Party[1], whose leader is the current prime minister of India, Narendra Modi, who himself embodies a form of charismatic authoritarian guruship (Jaffrelot 2021; Landau and Rageth 2023; Martelli and Jaffrelot 2023), complete with self-described *bhakt*s, or devotees (Kaur 2022). Significantly, public gurus—along with the intellectual, political and business elites that they emulate in various ways—are distinctly at home in new media environments. Broadly, two separate sets of scholarly literature cover these developments: first, a large body of scholarship has elaborated the importance of new media developments to the growth, spread and renewal of currents of Hindu nationalism. It has demonstrated, in particular, how print and audio-visual media, such as cassettes (Basu 1996), television (Rajagopal 2001), and latterly social media (Udupa 2018; Jaffrelot 2021), have significantly contributed to the ideological reproduction of Hindu nationalism and the ability of Hindutva organisations to mobilise middle-class consumers. Second, numerous studies emphasise the supportive relationship between Hindutva agendas and various gurus, which is uneven and not inevitable but in some cases undeniably extremely powerful. As Véronique Bouillier (2012) explains,

'new religious movements and gurus who situate themselves outside the main traditional sectarian organisations' and possess largely urban middle-class devotees with access to and at ease in global media circuits, hold an 'affirmative assertion of Hindu identity [that] may lead to an ideological proximity with Hindutva'. Notably, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) has been supported by a variety of 'modern gurus' from its inception in 1964 onwards (Jaffrelot 1996, p. 194).[2] Since Hindutva 'relies on referents to Hindu India's unparalleled spiritual prowess and moral authority' (McKean 1996, p. 1), and many of its proponents, as we shall see, consider guruship a valued Hindu cultural good to the point of maintaining the fiction of the infallibility of individual gurus, even where there is incontrovertible evidence of wrongdoing, it is not hard to understand why gurus and Hindutva might frequently instantiate relations of mutual mediation and support.[3]

Bringing together these different strands of scholarship, this commentary offers a reflection on the triangular interactive relationship between Hindutva, gurus and media.[4] The topic is not entirely novel—Lise McKean (1996, p. 1), in particular, underscored how gurus' adeptness at exploiting the expansion of transnational capitalism (presumably including the advance of related media technologies) can make them well-equipped to 'assist in propagating Hindu nationalism' (see also Zavos 2012; Lucia 2022)—but nevertheless, it remains underexamined. Following this, our commentary does not seek to cover the entirety of the relevant literature on guru–Hindutva entwinement but rather to expand on McKean's suggestion in exploring how media and mediation have played significant roles in finessing these connections, and how the nature of the relationship itself can be illuminated when thought of in terms of the different constituencies' *mediation of one another*. This is by no means a final statement but a call to focus attention on existent and emerging terrains of guru–media–Hindutva interaction and their vitality. Further, it posits no essential supportive relationship between the three entities. Media can be a key point of vulnerability for both gurus and proponents of Hindu nationalism, and many cases exist in which guru organisations and the trajectory of middle-class ideologies they frequently depend on are positioned beyond the constraints of an aggressively assertive Hindu nationalism (Zavos 2012, p. 27). While the triangular model of three poles or agents is helpful as an analytical device because it reflects a real and significant socio-political conjunction, we emphasise the variety of modular and situational discordances and inharmonious relations between the elements, which strongly militate against any sense of static relational structure.

This commentary suggests that Hindu nationalists understand gurus to be a specific form of valued Hindu cultural good, which helps to explain mediatised activist attempts to defend gurus from legal and media scrutiny. Further, it historicises the theme of guru domination, caste politics and Hindutva through the optics of matter and media, exploring both the mass remediation of Brahmanical guruship models that attended Hindutva's rise in the 1990s and the oppositional response it provoked, which we term 'the subaltern counter-publicity of the guru'. The commentary discloses how Hindutva is itself structurally composed of guru logics[5] at different scales; it embodies a kind of 'fractal guruship'. However, if Hindutva mediates principles of guruship, we also see how a multitude of public gurus mediate principles of Hindutva; albeit such mediation does not amount to straightforward replication of Hindutva principles but rather a more nuanced and selective re-presentation of them (Kim 2010). This 'bi-instrumentalism'[6] of Hindu nationalism and some gurus is witnessed in the instances we describe of gurus—and the idea of India as a guru—being used as a means of branding in order to normalise and convey what might be termed the 'Hindutva idea of India'. We suggest, in light of the frequent mutual mediation of gurus and Hindutva, that continued investment by devotees and commentators in gurus as figures embodying hope and the promise of post-communal amity can aptly be described in terms of *cruel optimism* (Berlant 2011). The idea that 'there is a revivalist movement dominating the psychological atmosphere of the country' in which 'all Hindu Gurujis, Swamijis, Maharshis, Babas and *mathadhishe*s [abbots] are advocating religious fundamentalism in the name of ancient Hindu culture and Sanatna Dharma' (Veeranna 2019, p. 48) is frequently strongly expressed and in some ways compelling. But it does not

tell the whole story. Our intention here is both to document precisely this phenomenon (through the fresh optic of media) and to offer important and necessary qualifications of it, showing how various 'Gurujis, Swamijis, Maharshis, Babas and *mathadhishe*s' are far from straightforwardly assimilable to such a story. Successful mediation and mediatisation of guru–Hindutva principles forms but one part of a larger picture, which also involves obstacles, roadblocks and the active countering of Hindutva dreams of singularity. Indeed, these different trajectories of guruship partly define each other, with the formation and subsequent remediation of authoritarian, Brahmanical, Hindutva-oriented spheres of guruship, encouraging the renewal of powerful counter-imaginings and mediations of guruship that foreground the possibility of other guru formations and modes of community.

We use the term 'guru' flexibly for a religious teacher or preceptor with connections, not necessarily formal ones, to the Hindu or the Sikh tradition, and 'public guru' to refer not only to globalising middle-class gurus who appear on television and possess millions of devotees but to any of the myriad public-facing gurus who hold some sort of media presence and seek to engage with politics or social service activities beyond the confines of the ashram. This commentary describes different sorts of gurus and different sorts of media for different purposes. These differences are important, and it does not aim to level out this diversity by putting rishis and sants in the same basket or equating guruship as embodied, for instance, in yoga dolls with the guru as embodied in Sikh scripture.[7] By juxtaposing such instances, however, this commentary proposes a kind of 'lateral comparison'—a comparison that 'travel sideways'—between different media contexts of guruship (Candea 2017). These contexts differ in highly significant ways, yet they are at the same time culturally and historically profoundly intertwined. Our understanding of media is similarly flexible and expansive. Gurus mediate not only spiritual knowledge but also principles of Hindutva. Hindutva practices and logics mediate principles of guruship. Both engage with and seek to harness different forms of media and material culture as means of instantiating and furthering their message and personas: statues, print media, TV, social media, dolls and more, as we shall see.

Such terms as 'Hindu nationalism' and 'Hindutva', too, cannot do justice to differentiations within and between different nationalisms and Hindu nationalisms. In the broadest sense, however, 'Hindu nationalism' refers to those who espouse 'Hindutva', 'a label for the politics of exclusive Hindu identity, as exemplified by the BJP, VHP, RSS, and Shiv Sena' (Heehs 1998, p. 116), which dates back to the 1920s.[8] This form of ethnic and religious supremacy, which upholds the idea of a Hindu nation, race and civilization (Hindu rashtra, Hindu jati, Hindu sanskriti) (Naudet and Mohammad-Arif 2021), is now the foremost political force and ideology in India, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi its dominating 'cult-like masculine ruler' as well as 'pater of the country' (Martelli and Jaffrelot 2023, p. 4). Its organisations and activists pursue a 'Hinduization project' (Naudet and Mohammad-Arif 2021)—a process of 'cultural reorganisation launched in reaction to external threats, real and/or imagined, in the form of Christian proselytization, the impact of British rule and the militancy of the Muslim minority' (Jaffrelot 1996, p. 6). This preoccupation with threats from 'foreign' forces arouses strong feelings of vulnerability, causing Hindu nationalists to seek to regain the self-esteem of the Hindu community, wounded by centuries of Mughal and European domination. However, as Naudet and Mohammad-Arif (2021) point out, such a project of reinvigorating the Hindu nation rests on a certain paradox: 'building itself against external influences and British colonialism, its conception of the nation is directly inspired by a foreign model, that of German nationalism and Nazism. That is why violence is one of the privileged means for the reconquest of Hindu hegemony'.

So what is the place of gurus in Hindu nationalist ideology and praxis? Key contemporary public contexts of the relationship centre, as we have already suggested, on the idea of gurus as a Hindu cultural good, and relatedly, on media controversy. As is well known, a longstanding mode of guru–media interaction centres on controversy and claims to legitimacy. As is also well known, the extreme inequality of guru–devotee relationships

is all too capable of creating the conditions for abuse and consequent media scrutiny of gurus (McCartney 2018; Lucia 2018). Mediatisation of guru-centred controversies is not a new occurrence. In the case of Guru Gulabdas (1809–1873) in Punjab, criticism of his intimate relationship with a Muslim prostitute principally took the form of 'poetic harangue' (Malhotra 2022). The Maharaj libel case of the 1860s hinged on allegations of adulterous behaviour among *gosain*s of the *pushtimarg* (Gold 1988, pp. 90–91). Though the origins of the case lay in the Gujarati press, the trial, with its many 'titillating revelations', soon 'thrilled scandalmongers throughout India with its tales of a guru gone bad' (Scott 2016, pp. 125, 124). Maya Warrier (2003, p. 233) argued that such media coverage relates to prevalent fears concerning the genuineness or otherwise of one's chosen master. Such fears are 'fanned by the numerous stories ... prominently publicized in the mass media, about gurus being exposed as conmen (and women) with criminal connections, using their spirituality as a facade for making money, or sexual predators using the mask of their celibacy to run clandestine sex rackets'.

However, if sensationalisation and moral panics have long comprised a key variety of media representation of guruship, the present era of Hindutva supremacy and outrage politics, where taking offence has become 'a common condition for the organization of mass publics' (Cohen 2012, p. 106), features a further 'meta-media' mode of representation in which criminality has come to lie in the act of pointing out actual criminal behaviour by gurus. This is because doing so 'hurts' Hindus' religious sentiments, with the former (the pointing out) displacing actual guru criminality. Consider how, in June 2022, Alt News co-founder Mohammed Zubair was arrested under section 295A of the Indian Penal Code, which deems 'deliberate and malicious acts, intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs' punishable by law, for describing three militant Hindutva gurus and priests—who had variously called for the eradication of Islam and the rape of Muslim women—'hatemongers'.[9] Such effacement of guru criminality with attacks on those who call attention to it forms part of a wider well-known Hindutva agenda of intimidating its critics (especially media figures such as Zubair), which now frequently involves the weaponization of social media platforms alongside 'intrusive levels of media surveillance' (Hamilton 2022, p. 392) that significantly restrain the activities of movements that dare to criticise the regime.[10]

Unsurprisingly, it is in part for electoral reasons that criticism of gurus is subject to legal and vigilante forms of Hindutva-instigated censorship, the assumption being that the political recruitment of consummate 'inclusive singularity' gurus constitutes simultaneously the recruitment of their followers.[11] Such 'ballot baba' gurus usually, though not always, direct their followers to vote for Hindutva political parties. In return, gurus may receive large-scale government funding (Ikegame 2012, p. 52), tax breaks (Copeman and Duggal 2023b) or—in the case of criminal gurus—protection from the law, their ashrams thus able to continue operating as something between a 'little fiefdom' (Singh 2017) and a 'temple racket' (Michelutti et al. 2019, p. 158).

However, the particular—highly possessive—Hindutva attitude towards the institution of guruship as a valued Hindu cultural good is a further key reason why Hindutva actors seek both to defend demonstrably corrupt and exploitative gurus and to censor and punish even mild media satire of the institution, with criticism of gurus coming to form yet another proof of a conspiracy to victimise Hindus, as in Christophe Jaffrelot's (1996, p. 76) famous description of Hindu nationalists as forming part of 'a majority with a minority complex'. Figure 1, a popular meme that displays the photos of six gurus who have been the subject of multiple and varied criminal allegations ranging from corruption to child sexual abuse, murder and more, and served prison sentences for the offences, demonstrates well the enrolment of gurus into Hindutva's minority complex, with criminal gurus and their supporters exemplifying Amrita Basu's (2022, p. 61) wider point concerning how '[a]ggressors who think of themselves as victims are apt to deny and thus normalize the violence they engage in' (see also Figure 2). Indeed, an especially extreme and virulent Hindu nationalist organisation was established in 2007 for the express purpose of defend-

ing 'victimised' Hindu *sadhu*s and gurus against their supposed large-scale persecution (Basu 2015, p. 185). In a tweet featuring the composite image depicted in Figure 1 and the hashtag '#AtrocitiesOnHinduSaints', BJP leader Subramaniam Swamy defends one particularly notorious criminal guru figure—Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) ally Asaram Bapu[12]—for having 'brought several Hindus back "home" [i.e., 'reconverting' them] to *sanatan dharam* ['the eternal religion'; i.e., orthodox Hinduism]. That is why Vatican City asked Sonia Gandhi to get him trapped in a fake case. Hindus Must Unite. Raise Your Voice.'[13] Swami Nithyananda, the subject of recent work by Amanda Lucia (2023), is one of the gurus featured in the composite 'persecuted gurus' image. As he faces numerous criminal charges, including large-scale financial fraud, it is the above-described 'crucial tropes [of] Hindutva'—that is, 'vocalised feelings of victimhood and a "siege mentality"' (Anderson 2015, p. 55)—that Nithyananda's followers drew on in mounting a global campaign that sought to 'recode Nithyananda and his followers not as criminals or frauds, but rather as persecuted and innocent victims of Hinduphobia' (Lucia 2023).[14]

Gurus, then, are at the centre of the recently emerged 'more politically "voicy" Hindutva concerned with regulating and disciplining public representations of Hinduism' (Reddy 2012, p. 313). It is not only representations of gurus as abusers and criminals that it seeks to discipline but also more light-hearted, comedic ones. For instance, in 2008 several Hindutva organisations sought a ban on the Hollywood film *The Love Guru*, which satirised the commercialisation of guruship. According to these groups, the film offensively mocked Hindus and 'the sanctity of the Guru-disciple tradition' (Chaudhry 2012, p. 332). Thus, if 'the 1980s saw the beginning of films of self-mockery of the public sphere', with savage satire of religious practices and forms of 'comic disrobing . . . all the more powerful as its targets were powerful godmen like the Saibaba of Puttaparti' (Nagaraj 2006, p. 103), there is now a concerted Hindutva-led attempt to bring this era to a halt.

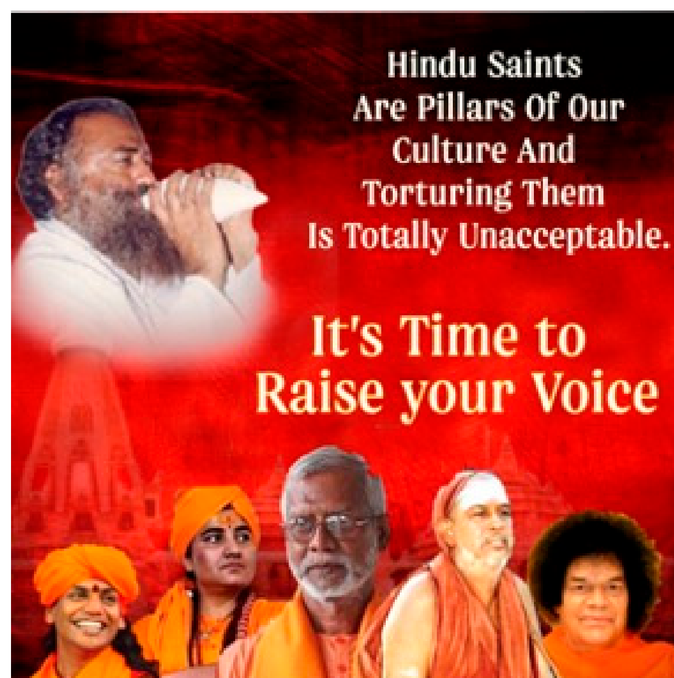

Figure 1. 'Save Hindu saints'. https://www.trendsmap.com/twitter/tweet/1540889774982062082 (accessed on 1 August 2023).

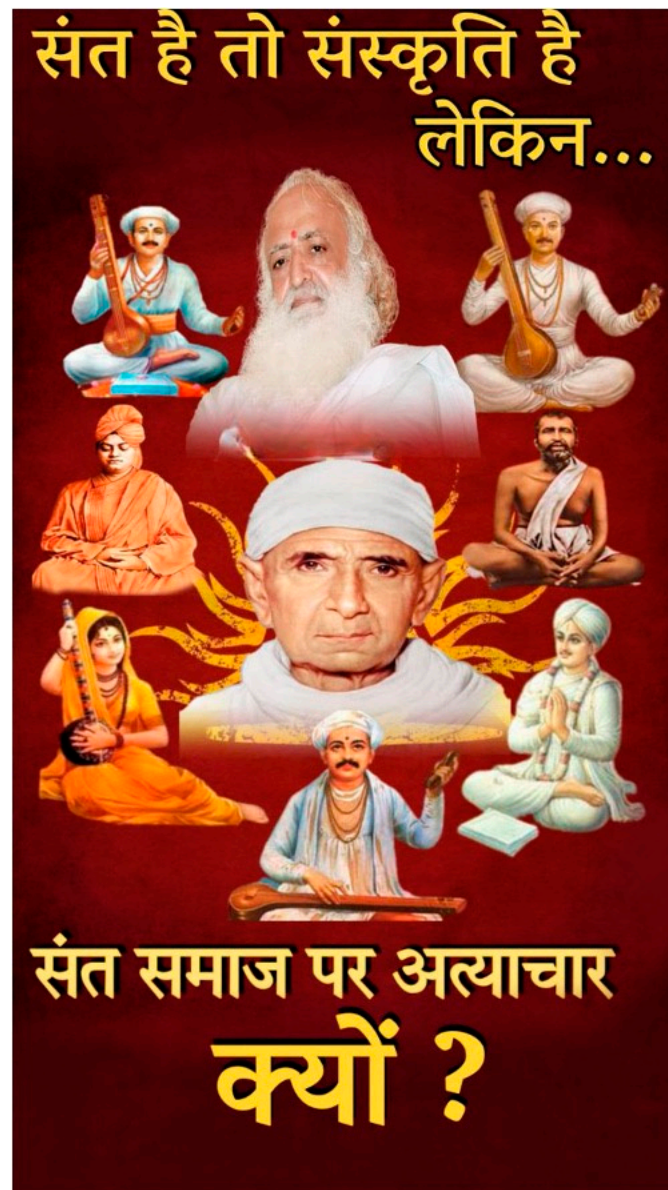

Figure 2. 'There is no culture without saints. But. . . why such atrocities on the community of saints?' https://www.trendsmap.com/twitter/tweet/1540889774982062082 (accessed on 1 August 2023).

Thus, a key modality of the triangular relationship consists of Hindutva activists defending suspect gurus in and from the media. Gurus are of course many, varied and irreducible to neat identification with Hindu nationalism, and the gurus whom activists defend most vehemently tend to be, if not outright proponents of Hindutva (like Baba Ramdev and Asaram Bapu), then at least somewhat congruent with wider Hindutva messaging. Nevertheless, guruship is claimed by Hindu nationalists as a Hindu good and asset in its entirety—a specifically Hindu civilisational achievement. The following section provides clues as to why this might be the case, whilst also disclosing the particular (somewhat limited) genres of guruship Hindutva ideology actually seeks to promote. We turn now, then, to the conjoint remediation of Hindutva and Brahmanical guru forms through television and other media, and its attendant counter-publicity.

2. Hindutva, Brahmanism and the Remediation of Guruship in India's Recent History

As many scholars have pointed out (e.g., Farmer 1996), the serial version of the epic Ramayana, telecast on the state-run channel Doordarshan (1987–1988), was crucial for fashioning a Hindu public that enabled the rise of Hindu nationalism in India in the 1990s.

The series 'not only aroused popular excitement around Hindu nationalism as a political sensibility but also . . . wove Hindutva into the everyday lives of television viewers' (Udupa 2018, p. 454). Less commented upon, though forming part of the same political-symbolic complex, was how Brahmanical models of guruship, with their strict precepts concerning caste, were showcased in the series. In the first episode, the sage Vasishtha (addressed as *Gurudev*) advises King Dasharatha to seek the blessing of rishi[15] Rishyasringara through the performance of *yajna* (fire sacrifice).[16] Vasishtha performs the Brahmanical ritual of naming, giving names—and identities—to the infants Ram, Laxman, Bharat and Shatrughan. The tradition of *guru–shishya* is further elaborated in the second and third episodes, in which guru Vasishtha takes Ram and his brothers, as *shishyas* (disciples/students), away from luxury and maternal love to the austerity of his gurukul (an ancient system of education), where he teaches them self-discipline, yoga and moral values. Ultimately, the figure of the rival guru, sage Vishwamitra, comes to overshadow that of Vasishtha. Vishwamitra teaches Ram how to navigate the material world, for instance, training him in warfare against demons or antigods (*asuras*) and other agents capable of disrupting the lifeworld of Aryas (or Aryans). Vishwamitra also takes Ram to Janakpuri to marry Sita. The deep involvement of Vasishtha and Vishwamitra in running the dynasty as spiritual and political guides to the king reasserts to viewers the importance of the role played by the guru as a pivotal authority in the structures of power.

Let us also consider the guru Dronacharya, depicted in the Mahabharata teaching archery, another art of warfare, to the princes of the Kaurava and Pandava clans. Dronacharya, or Guru Drona, is instilled in Hindu-Indian consciousness as the ideal guru figure, his most famous student of course being Arjuna. In one iconic painting in the style of the Ajanta frescoes by the famous Bengal school artist Nandalal Bose, which featured in the book *Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists* ([1914] 1967) by revivalists Ananda Coomaraswamy and Nivedita ([1914] 1967), Dronacharya is the central figure surrounded by disciples. The only figure emerging to prominence is the standing figure of Arjuna, aiming his bow and arrow at a target, as Dronacharya, beside him, instructs.

Scholars have shown how state and government institutions mediate guruship and *guru–shishya* relationships in numerous ways. Aya Ikegame (2012), for instance, has explored the history of complex guru–state relations in the Princely State of Mysore, while Arkotong Longkumer (2023) discusses the implications of the North East Zone Cultural Centre's (NEZCC) bestowal of the status of 'guru' on the northeast cultural icon Guru Rewben Mashengwa (the NDA government also recently honoured Jaggi Vasudev with the Padma Vibhushan[17] for 'exceptional and distinguished service'[18]). However, it is representations of Guru Drona as the ideal guru that are most frequently at the heart of state remediations of guruship. One example is the state-sponsored Dronacharya Award for outstanding coaches in sports and games, which 'honour[s] the teacher who moulds an athlete into a star'.[19] The trophy features two male figures standing beside each other. While bearing a mimetic relationship to Nandalal Bose's illustration, the intimate bond between master and disciple is more prominent on the trophy: they hold the bow together, the guru's hand placed on Arjuna's arm as the arrow is aimed at the target. The two almost become one, as if the figure of the disciple is emerging from the guru.

State remediation of Dronacharya was also evidenced in April 2016, when the government of Haryana, under the leadership of former RSS *pracharak*[20] Manohar Lal Khattar, renamed Gurgaon[21] as Gurugram, 'village of the guru'.[22] State publicity proclaimed that 'Haryana was a historic land mentioned in the *Bhagwat Gita* and Gurgaon had been a great centre of learning, where Guru Dronacharya used to provide education to the Pandavas and Kauravas . . . [T]he village was given as "*gurudakshina*" [offering to the guru] to him by his students, the Pandavas.'[23] The guru is thus remediated into a 'state narrative of exemplarity' (Gayer and Therwath 2010) through award statuettes, government-sourced news stories, websites and other publicity, including one state's high-profile renaming of a global city. However, not mentioned in state publicity extolling Dronacharya as the ideal guru is the dark fate of one of his pupils, the tribal subject Ekalavya. Consideration of Ekalavya's

fate positions Dronacharya as a very different sort of exemplar to the romanticised one envisioned by the (in this case, Hindutva) state. From this angle, Dronacharya comes to exemplify—or form the prototype of—the kind of guru who sees in his undisputed authority a licence to abuse the bodies of his disciples. Let us consider now a kind of subaltern counter-publicity of the (Brahmanical) guru.

Nandalal Bose also illustrated Ekalavya's story, but in contrast with his depiction of Dronacharya and Arjuna, surrounded by other disciples, we see in this illustration Ekalavya's solitary seated figure as an outcaste, an untouchable subject who was denied the privilege of learning directly under the guru. For, despite his skill surpassing even that of Arjuna, he was rejected as a disciple by the guru: low-status Nishada princes like Ekalavya cannot reside with Ksatriyas and Brahmans in a gurukul (Cohen 2012, p. 103). For this reason, it was necessary for Ekalavya to find a way to make the guru present otherwise. Hence, Bose portrays the solitary figure learning archery beside an idol he has made himself of his guru, Dronacharya, carved out of rock, an instance of 'distributed guruship' (Copeman et al. 2023). According to Jaffrelot's compelling interpretation, since Ekalavya's aptitude greatly increased in spite of this, the story presents 'a sign that the value of the relation with the master stems first and foremost from the subjectivity of the disciple' (2012, p. 89). The necessary remediation of the guru, in another telling, is enacted slightly differently: 'the Nishada prince, touching Drona's feet with bent head, wended his way into the forest, and there he made a clay-image of Drona, and began to worship it respectfully as if it was his real preceptor' (Mahabharata, 1: 134, from Ganguli 1884, p. 280). Yet, upon hearing that he remained the guru of the low-status prince, even at one remove, Drona demanded Ekalavya's right thumb—vital, of course, for the practice of archery—as *guru dakshina*. The rejected disciple obeyed the command to self-mutilate as an act of devotion towards the guru.

Following this, we consider a further critical visual remediation of the Guru Drona story, namely graffiti images on the walls of Hyderabad Central University of Ekalavya's severed thumb alongside portraits of Rohith Vemula, a 26-year-old Dalit PhD student who had recently taken his own life, and activism in which students re-enact and represent Ekalavya's ordeal by lacerating their thumbs (Figure 3). Dalit activist criticism of Guru Drona and reverence for Ekalavya are not new: take the famous activist Phoolan Devi's 'Eklavya Sena' (army of Eklavya), which taught self-defence to marginalised community members in the 1990s (Doron 2014) and a mock trial of Guru Drona conducted by Dalit activists, in which he was sentenced to be hanged for not accepting Ekalavya as his student (Narayan 2006). Yet, the graffiti images indicate how, in the wake of a number of suicides of students from historically marginalised communities facing discrimination in institutions of higher education, the figure of Ekalavya has taken on renewed significance as a symbol of the denial of access to learning in modern universities. For instance, soon after Vemula's suicide, protesting students organised public talks in a series called 'Ekalavya Speaks', in which students and academics from marginalised communities narrated their experiences of discrimination and exclusion in education.[24] Clearly, Dalit, Adivasi and Bahujan students' identification of and with Ekalavya as a historically oppressed subject features a conception of Guru Drona that is very different from state narratives of exemplarity, disturbing not only the politics of reverence attached to him but also dominant celebratory depictions of gurukuls, *guru–shishya* relations and *guru dakshina* as glories of Hindu civilisation. Dronacharya now comes to light as a conspicuous representative and advocate of a Brahmanical tradition that mythologically and materially justifies the system of untouchability and denial of access to those outside the Varna hierarchy—a tradition that remains alive and well—and as a kind of prototype for those gurus that claim custody and use-rights over the bodies of their disciples. We refer here both to the sexual exploitation of devotees, already mentioned, and to how gurus have enacted other forms of violence on their devotees, including castration and sterilisation (Voix 2008; Lucia 2021). The involvement of gurus in less overtly violent practices, such as mass blood donation

campaigns, also often rests on expectations and assumptions of the guru's corporeal control over devotees and their automatic assent (Copeman 2009).

Rohith Vemula case: Dalit students protest in 'Eklavya' avatar

Figure 3. The Rohith Vemula case: Dalit students protest in 'Eklavya' avatar. Source: YouTube channel ABP News. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=33hMHv3s5JM (accessed on 1 August 2023).

Guru Drona was split into two through a practice of mediation from the start—the complex tyrant who first rejected and then demanded the mutilation of Ekalavya versus the idealised copy of the clay idol (Cohen 2012)—and there continue to be two Dronas, the one glorified in particular by Hindutva organisations and that of a figure considered to be fit for hanging. Famously, another Brahmanical guru-like figure resisted by Ambedkarite Dalits, but defended by Hindutva organisations, is the sage Manu. Ever since Dr Ambedkar's original Mahad Satyagraha agitation of 1927, resisting the Brahmanical guru has taken the form of annually burning the *Manusmriti* (Laws of Manu), the corpus of Hindu religious laws that prescribes Dalits' subordination. But not only texts. When, in 1989, a 10-foot-tall statue of Manu holding the book was installed inside the compound of the Rajasthan High Court in Jaipur, a huge state-wide Dalit agitation demanded its removal, which was met by large-scale opposition from the Hindutva organisation the VHP. The statue, which is still standing, most recently was smeared with black paint by Adivasi and Dalit activists from Aurangabad, an event that was linked with global media circuits, with activists claiming inspiration from the toppling of the statue of the benefactor of Bristol and slave trader Edward Colston following Black Lives Matter protests in 2020.[25]

While the subaltern counter-publicity of the guru that we have traced is important, it is also necessary to recall how Hindu ideas of guruhood have occasionally served as significant resources for historically marginalized communities. Of particular note has been the adoption of the name of the sage Valmiki by the lowest among the formerly untouchable castes. Famously, the Valmiki community came to consider Valmiki, author of the most influential version of the Ramayana, 'a Godly figure (*bhagwan*) and not merely *rishi* (sage)' (Snehi 2023, pp. 21–22). Complicating straightforward narratives of Sanskritization and what could appear like their endorsement of a text sanctioning their own exclusion, popularisation of Valmiki devotion among former untouchables in Punjab directly led to the community's appropriation and reclamation of a popular Hindu pilgrimage centre in Amritsar named Ram Tirath. 'A site believed to be the abode of Rishi/Bhagwan Valmiki where Sita, the wife of Rama took refuge [and] apparently gave birth to Rama's two sons,

Lav and Kush' (ibid, p. 23), it was renamed Valmiki Tirath. The successful renaming and subsequent inauguration of the Bhagwan Valmiki Tirath Asthan temple complex in 2016, which features an 8-foot-tall 800-kg gold-plated idol of Valmiki, not only foregrounds the Valmiki community's successful reclamation of a contested pilgrimage site, but also demonstrates how the celebrated Hindu god 'Rama, therefore, becomes peripheral' (ibid, p. 25) in Valmiki religiosity. The guru status among many Dalits of Ambedkar himself, a figure who famously warned against hero-worship as 'a path to degradation and eventual dictatorship' (Sorabjee 2019), might equally seem to point towards appropriation of 'Hindu' guru logics. But this parallel also invites caution. As Himansu Charan Sadangi explains, 'Ambedkar is by no means a guru in the way Maharishi Mahesh Yogi or Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh or any of the contemporary cult figures are gurus . . . One's guru does not need to be saintly in character or religious in profession; he needs only to be the one who points towards enlightenment'; and enlightenment here, of course, means precisely moving away from the Brahmanical values and social structures, including Brahmanical models of guruship, that we have been delineating. Sadangi refers to the famous portrait of Ambedkar in which he is 'usually clad in a blue business suit, a book in his hand, a fountain pen in his pocket, placed beside the picture of the yellow-robed Buddha'. Such a picture, writes Sadangi, 'makes clear the very human sort of guru he was' (Sadangi 2008, p. 357).[26]

We have considered, then, how mass remediations of the guru on state television have showcased and endorsed the figure of the Brahman guru as a pivotal authority to be submitted to, and other state remediations that include awards, renamings and statues. We have seen how Hindutva forces have been entwined with these remediations at every step, but also how such remediations have been strongly contested in practices of counter-mediation of the guru. The material media of guruship can form potent objects of controversy, from the bow and arrows, clay idol and bodily severing featured in the Mahabharata, right up to the present day. Such media have been vital for both perpetuating and stymieing particular conceptions of the guru. If Manu as guru/rishi is embodied as scriptural authority in the *Manusmriti*, the burning of this text by Ambedkar and then annually on Manusmriti Dahan Divas, as well as attacks on his statue, are acts of resistance against the figure of the Brahmanical guru more broadly.[27] Valuable though recent scholarship on gurus as figures of controversy and exploitation is, its focus on recent cases runs the risk of entrenching the perception that the phenomenon is *only* a recent one. In contrast, we have engaged various guru iconographies and material and visual culture resources to convey how the guru has always been a figure not only of reverence but also oppression, his relationship with his disciples profoundly unequal and prone to abuse based on differences of caste, class, gender and sexuality.

3. Hindutva's Guru Logics

We turn now to a different form of mediation in which guru logics and Hindutva practices and principles, respectively, are the principal forms of media at stake as mediators of one another. We begin by enumerating how guru logics are mediated by Hindutva organisations in numerous ways.

The RSS is frequently framed as a guru to the BJP and other constituents of the Sangh Parivar. M.S. Golwalkar, the second RSS leader, was known as Guruji, originally because he had briefly taught at the Banaras Hindu University (Guha 2019, p. 348), though he also embodied various stereotypical guru traits and aesthetics, for a time lived in an ashram, and was revered as a guru of the spiritual kind by many RSS volunteers (a hagiographic account of his life, written by current prime minister Narendra Modi, is titled 'Pujniya Shri Guruji', that is, 'Guru Worthy of Worship' (Patel 2014); Guha, on the other hand, terms him a 'guru of hate . . .whose life's malevolent work was—as Jawaharlal Nehru so memorably put it—to make India into a "Hindu Pakistan"' (Guha 2019, p. 349)). Further, 'a *pracharak* takes oath before the guru of the Sangh, the *bhagwa dhwaj* (saffron flag), which is recognised as the victory flag of Shivaji' (Kanungo 2012, p. 150), and found in the chariots of the wars of the Mahabharata, symbolising 'sacrifice, power . . .. It is the color of fire' (Longkumer 2021,

p. 18). Meanwhile, RSS recruits are assigned mentors in a mode of pedagogy structured on *guru–shishya* (disciple) relationships. The disciple is treated by the mentor as his *manas putra* (mind-born son) (Jaffrelot 2021, p. 35). Further, the Vivekananda Kendra, a Hindu nationalist 'spiritually oriented service mission', takes the Vedic syllable Om for its guru (Kanungo 2012, p. 150), demonstrating the shape-shifting quality of the guru beyond the human, the ready capacity of the originary template of the living person as a manifestation of the divine (Gold 1987, p. 3) to be transferred into other objects or concepts, some retaining a human trace or morphology as in our earlier discussion of Ekalavya's clay model and others abstracted from the human entirely (see e.g., Mandair 2023).

A further important Hindutva mediation of guruship concerns its ideological importance in Hindutva discourses concerning the Indian Constitution. Written by a Constituent Assembly dominated by the Congress Party and serving as a key public resource for numerous marginalised groups (De 2018), the Constitution is almost always disparaged by Hindutva writers, with guruship proposed as the institution that ideally would replace it. Recalling the earlier discussion of Hindutva endorsement of Brahmanical guru forms that are deeply implicated in central structures of power, Anustup Basu explains that in the ideal Hindutva scenario, 'the president with authoritarian powers should be guided spiritually by a council of sages operating as the Raj Guru (the Brahmin advisor to the king)' (Basu 2020, p. 26). Basu considers such 'Brahmanical stewardship' to be already present in the form of the VHP's College of Holy Men: 'It is this assembly of god-men—now imagined along the lines of an ecumenical council with papal infallibility—that must incarnate the revived authority of the Raj Guru' (27). Meanwhile, Jaffrelot (2012) has written of the RSS itself, made up of worldly abstainers, as a new kind of Raj Guru or moral counsellor—at least, that was Golwalkar's aim for it—and it is under Modi that it has come closest to establishing just such a role for itself as 'the prince's advisor', as when RSS leader Mohan Bhagwat staged a series of three-day conferences at a prestigious government convention centre in 2018 (Jaffrelot 2021, pp. 169, 222).

Hindutva's mediations of guru principles as structuring elements of the relations that comprise it suggest something almost akin to a 'fractal guruship', with guruship a fractally recurrent self-similar organising principle at every scale (Lebner 2017, p. 13). But that is not all. The Hindutva organisation Hindu Janajagruti Samiti (Society for Hindu Awakening), in its literature, declares 'Bharat the "Spiritual Master (Guru)" of the World'.[28] Basu (2020, p. 161) describes the Sangh Parivar's relationship to the 'Vishwa Guru', or world teacher concept, in terms of 'providential yearning' for 'global spiritual dominance'. (With reference to science, in particular, it has been suggested that the Hindu right has a '"jagatguru" complex', according to which 'India appears as the giver of science, but never a taker').[29] For the BJP, meanwhile, the concept forms part of a branding strategy for showcasing national glories, a means of increasing the country's '"magnetic power" by returning [it] to the *viśva-guru* status it apparently once enjoyed' (McCartney and Lourenço 2023). This brings us back to the convergence of gurus, Hindutva and commerce analysed by McKean: Hindutva 'world guru' appropriations enact the branding of the country via guruship models. Relatedly, Koushiki Dasgupta (2021) describes the current cohort of global gurus as soft Hindutva's 'brand ambassadors'. The employment of guru concepts in national and Hindutva branding strategies is also a key theme of recent work by McCartney and Lourenço (2023), which argues that children's 'fashion' and 'action' yoga dolls mediate guru principles, and indeed can act as non-human gurus for the intergenerational transmission of yoga knowledge to children. Central to this consumptive spirituality model is an alternative architecture of authority and tradition. These do not flow from a teacher, and neither are they legitimated by an established tradition; rather, the toy industry enters the arena of 'yoga articulations', with the healthy 'yoga lifestyle' now transmitted through 'gift-giving from adults to children'. This very distinct manifestation of the guru-sphere is connected by Hindutva politicians to aspirations for a '*swadeshi* toy industry' as a feature of 'New India' branding, a vision that is in tune with their 'world guru' ambitions, which these toys can be imagined as realising—doll by doll—via their global distribution. This is exactly the kind of 'triangulation of culture, identity, and

the market' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009, p. 20) that elsewhere we have sought to highlight under the rubric of 'Guru, Inc.' (Copeman et al. 2023).

In his work on yoga guruship, Patrick McCartney (2021, p. 62) goes further still to suggest that in harnessing yoga to cure the ills of the world—for instance, in initiating International Yoga Day—'Modi, as the representative of the Indian state, reflexively frames the nation as the paragon of moral virtue and, by default, *he* is the *viśvaguru* (world teacher) who can guide humanity toward a greener, more sustainable form of development' (our emphasis). This point has been picked up by Landau and Rageth (2023), who explore a novel 'guru twist' to what was already the unprecedented media phenomenon of Narendra Modi's ascent. The media's role in promoting Modi has received considerable scholarly attention (Srivastava 2015; Chakravartty and Roy 2015). In the years following the organised killings of Muslims that took place in Gujarat in 2002, during his tenure as Chief Minister, he came to be rebranded as a developmental 'strongman', relentless in the pursuit of development and industry (Cohen 2008). He was soon further transformed into an icon of yoga and fashion by the media, 'pampered, choreographed, and fawningly advertised in media engagements' (Basu 2020, p. 168). During the 2014 general election campaign, in addition to the hyperactivity of the famed BJP Information Technology cell that amplified his image at every step, 3D hologram technology was employed to extend Modi's presence even in his absence: 'If the sheer number of rallies at which Modi spoke was impressive, what was more impressive was the fact that millions of people in more than a thousand other locations were "touched" by the magical projection of his three-dimensional electronic image, like the coming down to earth of a distant god' (169).

Yet, Landau and Rageth register a significant departure from this mode of media self-presentation that took place during the COVID-19 lockdowns of 2020–2021: a striking shift towards guru aesthetics. Adopting a new visual grammar, Modi now appeared with long hair and an unkempt beard and in simpler, earthy-coloured clothes made from traditional fabrics that were symbolically coded as Hindu in various ways. His comportment also registered subtle changes. Landau and Rageth (2023, p. 132) are careful to point out that varied ascetic traits—kinlessness, abstinence, celibacy—formed part of the Modi image even before his more full-throated 'guru turn'. The point is that 'it is a recent and notable phenomenon that the guru appearance is overriding other aspects of the previously multifarious Modi'. Following this, the authors foreground the experimental nature of the guru performance, as different combinations of worldliness and asceticism are tried out so that Modi can be positioned as 'in the world, but not of the world', with no single guru mimetically embodied but rather traits and accoutrements associated with varied guru personas, the better to evoke 'a multitude of references' and so tap a wider set of constituencies (130–31). McCartney and Lourenço's (2023) work, already mentioned, describes yet another manifestation of Modi as a guru, this time as an animated character with whom one can learn yoga. In the BJP's 'Yoga with Modi' initiative, participants can enter a specially designed room where they are met by an 'anthropomorphically animated version of Modi' ready to dispense yoga classes in a variety of languages, with 'the claims of India be(com)ing the world guru [thereby] compressed into Modi's yoga guru avatar' (106).

Landau and Rageth's articulation of mimetic embodiment as a mode of mediating a generalised 'guruness' rather than specific guru figures, which builds on recent literature on devotees' mimetic relationship to their guru (Srinivas 2010; Lucia 2014a) and gurus' incorporation of one another in the mode of psychic miming (Copeman 2012; Copeman and Ikegame 2012), is complemented by Martelli and Jaffrelot's (2023) recent highly original study of 'mimetic identification' as central to Modi's performance of populism as it pertains specifically to speech. Modi's ability to speak 'the language of the people' in his political communications is measured according to its relative similarity with various populist comparators, including the discourses of popular public gurus 'whose success rely on a direct, personal, and accessible relationship with devotees' (3). Mimicking particular facets of guru speech allows him to finesse otherwise paradoxical or unwieldy combinations of messages; for instance, anti-elitist modesty and the adoption of authoritarian postures,

and a doctrine of selflessness alongside the promulgation of a cult of personality. Indeed, Jaffrelot (2021, p. 130) compares the fatherly tone of his addresses to that of the speeches of M. K. Gandhi, though it also recalls the 'demand for subjective identification with the father' (Borneman 2004, p. 4), as is frequently found in totalitarian states led by supreme rulers. Modi's 'natural authority', too, 'shows in his ability to give orders without having to raise his voice (on the contrary, in fact, he simply takes on a more sanctimonious tone), elicits respect (blended with a degree of fear) as well as a type of submission that resembles obedience to a guru or a fakir' (Jaffrelot 2021, p. 130). So far as Gandhi is concerned, Satish Deshpande (2022) speculates as to whether 'Narendra Modi [will] manage to install himself as the dialectical culmination (in "action-reaction" mode) of the saint-politician model inaugurated by the Mahatma'. Certainly, for all their differences, Gandhi's ability to 'sublimat[e] the figure of the guru or charismatic saint into a practice of intimate publicity' (Scott 2019, p. 67) apparently serves as an important template for Modi in terms of his own self-presentation.[30]

In a slightly different yet complementary manner to Martelli and Jaffrelot, Landau and Rageth's analysis similarly demonstrates how Modi's appropriation of a guru persona allows him to cover all the bases. Marshalling an array of recent instances of the guru turned politician, they conclude that 'what we are witnessing is the merging of a Hindu guru and politician in one and the same person', with Modi's guru persona 'the epitome of this development' (see also Bouillier 2015, 2020). Harking back to the Raj Guru concept discussed earlier, we begin to see how Modi's 'guru turn' embodies a new totalism in which he unites the kingly and Raj Guru spheres, drawing on the reservoirs of authority associated with each figure to create 'a new and all-powerful position' (Landau and Rageth 2023)—a guru beyond guruship and a politician beyond the political. To be sure, thinking of Modi as a powerful 'more-than-guru' or 'guru but *not only*'[31] is helpful in signalling that his assumption of guruship is just one of his sources of power. Consider, for instance, how only one of the unprecedented aspects of the Bhoomi Pujan (ground-breaking ceremony for the construction of a grand temple) at Ayodhya in August 2020 was Modi's attendance not only as chief guest and master of ceremonies but as its *high priest and* chief ritual officiant (Jaffrelot 2021, p. 438). Moreover, if Modi's intention was to embody a figure who often operates beyond democracy and accountability, then the guru was an appropriate choice for this.

One such guru figure is the DSS head, introduced earlier, who ruled as a kind of 'localised sovereign' (Humphrey 2004; Ikegame 2019) over a *dera* which operated as an extra-legal 'little fiefdom' with its own army and, reportedly, its own currency (Singh 2017).[32] The *MSG: Messenger of God* series of films he released from 2015 to 2017, which are the subject of recent work by Copeman and Duggal (2023b), showcases a striking instance of 'spillover guruship' [33] that witnesses the guru translate himself into more and more spheres of operation and publicity. Since public guruship, 'channeled via recurrent, intent, dramatic forms of *deep play*' (Silber 2019, p. 135), already borrowed from theatre and other performance arts, the DSS guru's Bollywood performances were not entirely novel but rather explicitised existing latencies within the public guru operation.[34] The films foreground, in particular, the guru's shift from promoting a 'banal, distanced, and -lite' form of Hindu nationalism (McCartney 2021, p. 36) to a more strident variety that explicitly endorses Modi's agenda. The films depict the heroic guru playing different versions of himself as he runs through a host of neo-Hindutva clichés: cow protection, *shuddhi*, anti-Pakistan rhetoric complete with 'surgical strikes' and strong-arm 'development'. Indeed, public gurus' embrace of 'development nationalism' (Lucia 2022), often tied together with or building on broad-based *seva* initiatives and established social reform efforts, is fairly longstanding (see Copeman 2009; Copeman and Ikegame 2012; Beckerlegge 2015). However, its explicit framing after Modi's own approach as a matter of sovereign pride, with 'the full range of symbolic apparatuses of the Hindutva movement' mobilised in its defence (Cohen 2008, p. 41), is more novel and a point of reciprocal mimesis given that in such cases, it is Modi who is the one emulated by gurus.[35]

The focus of the DSS guru's second film, *MSG 2*, is his attempts to civilise indigenous Adivasi communities through both force and 'love'. Reflecting the tendency in representations of Indic indigeneity to reproduce colonial-era tropes of 'criminal tribes' and a 'series of stereotypes of adivasis as our "primitive other", with a propensity for violence and quick to take up arms (Bates and Shah 2017, p. 2), the guru is able successfully to 'humanise the devils' (*in shaitano ko insan bananay keliye*), who then come to recognise him as their 'Adi Guru'. The guru claims to seek to transform the Adivasis with the *hathyar* (weapon) of *pyar* (love), though there are also many fight sequences. Promoting vegetarianism and 'proper' attitudes towards the cow through motifs of civilisational progress and purification, *MSG 2*′s narrative thereby dovetailed with the wider context of the time in which it was released, which was one of Hindutva political dominance and drastic increases in the lynching of Muslims and Dalits by 'cow protection' vigilantes after Modi became prime minister (Mohammad-Arif and Naudet 2020). The film shows how Adivasis, having eventually submitted to the guru's civilising overtures, are escorted by members of his 'welfare force' back to their huts to cover their obscenely naked bodies and trim their nails. Meanwhile, the guru is shown showering water on bare-bodied men. The sequence recalls the *shuddhi* (purification) ceremonies performed by the proto-Hindutva Arya Samaj socioreligious organisation that brought converts back into the Hindu fold (Jones 1976), symbolised by the transformation of the Adivasis into 'clean' villagers. After being made to stop drinking *mahua* (local fruit-based liquor) and enter the structure of north Indian kinship relations, Adivasi men and women are shown marrying before the guru. They are forced, as well, to give up hunting and instead cultivate crops and change their attitude towards the cow.

Jattu Engineer, the final film released before the guru's imprisonment, appeared in May 2017. Remaining centrally concerned with reform and transformation, in this case, of a village and its inhabitants, this time the guru takes the role of a school headmaster, Shakti Singh Sisodiya, whose arrival in the village begins to bring change to its inhabitants through his instilling of self-respect. The second change concerns village infrastructure. Here, the developmental vision of the guru comes to the fore as he tackles the problems of open defecation, lack of drainage and failing agriculture. As in the preceding films, these improvements are effected through both fear and benevolence; in one scene, for instance, the teacher humiliates and beats the *sarpanch*. Such a muscular, authoritarian development crusade is entirely in keeping with Modi's cultivated image as Vikas Purush (Development Man), with human rights and environmental campaigners recast as opponents of development to be 'charismatically dominated' (Weber 1971, pp. 320–29) by the extraordinary qualities of the development crusader.

The *MSG* films' compliant transmission of various Hindutva priorities and mimetic reproduction of Modi's brand of development nationalism shows how gurus may mediate Hindutva principles just as Hindutva organisations mediate principles of guruship. Yet, though the DSS had long propounded a Hindutva-lite philosophy, it had no deep investment in Hindutva politics. Its guru's support for Modi was expedient, as is the case for many 'Hindutva gurus'. Indeed, it is important to clarify that the fact that many public gurus operate 'in service of and in conjunction with PM Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist government' (Lucia 2021, p. 422) is not indicative of some larger coordinated movement on their part towards and in favour of Hindutva politics. Their participation, instead, is usually primarily about advancing their own self-interest by aligning with the dominant political forces. Prior to 2014, the DSS guru (and, therefore, DSS followers) had supported the Congress. This had afforded the guru a measure of protection from the numerous criminal charges he then faced.[36] However, in 2014, the political winds were such that strategic alignment with the ongoing populist politics of the BJP came to make sense. It 'worked' for both parties up to a point—the BJP made gains in the guru's regions of influence (parts of Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and, to a lesser extent, Delhi), and in government it ensured that the guru's first feature film *MSG: Messenger of God* was released, despite the Censor Board's initial ban on it, a subplot that we discuss elsewhere.[37] Since Modi was in place as PM at the time of each film's release, to mediate in docile fashion Hindutva principles and

talking points was simultaneously to transmit the priorities of the central government, reflecting the longstanding arrangement in which politicians and gurus cooperate in exacting dominion (Jaffrelot 2012) and mutually legitimate one another (Bouillier 2015), borrowing from each other's status and power at their convenience. This was also visible during the 2020–2 phase of the COVID-19 pandemic when several well-known gurus were tasked with mediating key state and indeed global health authority communications as trusted vehicles for conveying key messages to their followers concerning social distancing, the need to obey state guidelines, etc. Thereby instantiated was a form of bi-instrumentalism (Copeman and Quack 2019): global and state health institutions tap into public gurus' authoritative status and the dense network of mediation strategies and technologies they have at their disposal (Zavos 2012, p. 3) and, equally, public gurus tap into the momentum of the situation as an opportunity to 'extend their range'. The different constituencies 'interoperate' with one another: the relationship is bi-instrumental.

In an echo of how the British colonial government came to rely on Indian intermediaries to promote sanitary science and inoculation campaigns—seeking, as David Arnold (1993, p. 233) put it, 'to annex to their own cause the authority which "natural leaders" had over their coreligionists, caste-followers, and dependents'—Modi convened a video-conference call with Indian religious leaders to seek their assistance. Though ecumenical, with representatives from Islamic, Christian and Sikh organisations, it featured a heavy concentration of Modi's 'chosen gurus'[38] and guru organisations: Baba Ramdev, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Bhaiyyaji Joshi of the RSS, Sadhguru and representatives of BAPS, the Brahma Kumaris, Gayatri Parivar, Ramkrishna Mission, Vardhman Seva Kendra, Kalyanji Anandji and the Shri Sathya Sai Foundation. During the call, 'Brahmavihari Swami described to the PM the BAPS's steps to ensure not just resource support to the poor, but emotional and spiritual support to everyone to ensure the mental peace of citizens. He highlighted that adherence to the lockdown will be sustained only if everyone sees it as a religious and moral duty. Everyone pledged their support to the government's measures for the wellbeing of the citizens of India'.[39] With their business models already focused on well-being, soothing emotions and promotion of healthy living (Gooptu 2016), gurus were certainly well positioned to intervene in ways that might be beneficial for both citizens and themselves. At a time when 'the social dynamics of ventilation' (Solomon 2021, p. 105) could not have been more urgent, this was especially true of those gurus who specialise in breathing techniques. The 'breathing gurus', indeed, did not hold back from offering their own brand of 'breathing support' at a time when ventilators were in even shorter supply than usual.[40]

However, though public gurus need to be needed and welcome opportunities for charismatic transfers between themselves and resonant political figures, such as the video-conference call with Modi, they are not necessarily amenable to controlled deployment.[41] Numerous gurus went 'off message': 'When a (vegetarian) Hindu leader gathered a number of followers for a *gaumutra* [cow urine] drinking session, he explained that the virus is an *avatara* descended to restore the universal balance which deteriorated because of the increasing numbers of meat-eaters. Several Indic gurus stated that the virus is the result of collective negative karma and urged for a return to a more holistic and *sattvik* [pure] lifestyle' (Lorea 2020, p. 308). India's rationalists claimed an upsurge in membership during the time of the pandemic because it made clear to '[m]any, especially the young, . . . the futility of the teachings of godmen and practitioners of pseudoscience' (Jinoy 2020). Early in the pandemic, doctors and rationalists were vexed by the 'dangerous claim' Baba Ramdev made about his newly developed Coronil tablets, namely, that they effected a 100 per cent cure in seven days and a 69 per cent cure in three.[42] Later on, doctors wore black armbands 'to protest against a guru . . . who claims that yoga and traditional medicine offer stronger protection against COVID-19 than vaccines. Doctors accuse Baba Ramdev . . . of deliberately stoking vaccine hesitancy and suspicions about modern medicine to promote his own ayurvedic medicine company, Patanjali Ayurved' (Kazmin and Singh 2021). Such cases are ambiguous. Insofar as they deviate from government scripts, we apparently

observe the intercessory limits of the guru vis-à-vis state information distribution. Yet, if 'Modi's affirmation in 2014 that the transplantation of the elephant head of the god Ganesha to a human body was a great achievement of Indian surgery reflects an attempt to recover the "lost glory" of the Vishwa guru Bharat' (Kinnvall and Singh 2022, p. 11), Ramdev's agenda is consistent with this, even if it is also firmly focused on his own commercial interests.

4. Reflection

We have seen how Hindu nationalists mediate guruship forms and principles and further how gurus mediate Hindutva forms and principles, but we have also noted that these are differential, graded processes subject to contestation and with many exceptions. Within this wider manifestation, we have focused attention on a particular mutual replication of media strategies, a mimetic process characterised by a certain recursiveness: Modi replicates the populist communicative modes of the public guru; gurus replicate Modi's 'development nationalism' and other aspects of his agenda and modus operandi.

Mimetic cross-referencing between guru figures across time and space is a key element of Geeta Kapur's (2000) discussion of the 1936 film *Sant Tukaram* on the life of the low-caste saint of the same name (see also Copeman and Ikegame 2012; Copeman and Duggal 2023a, 2023b). Such cross-referencing is observable between the film and 'outside' political history in the making, which was dominated at the time by the spiritual hegemony of Mahatma Gandhi. The presence of Vishnupant Pagnis, the actor playing Tukaram, 'extends beyond his fine, nearly beatific countenance, beyond his actor's reverie, beyond even his being, into becoming through discourse a reflective symbol within a political situation already conditioned by a contemporary "saint", Mahatma Gandhi' (Kapur 2000, p. 242). Contemporary guru self-presentations, for instance, with their emphasis on muscular welfarism, both complement and collude with Modi government messaging, extending beyond the devotional field and into the political situation. Further, if, as portrayed in the Tukaram film, 'Gandhi is in a sense the actor-pedagogue on the nationalist stage' on which the representation of Tukaram draws (Kapur 2000, p. 242), present-day public gurus similarly draw on elements of Modi's persona. They become reflective symbols of him. Yet, we have also seen how gurus' appropriation of Modi is not one-sided but in some ways mutual: he becomes a reflective symbol of them.

Yet, such an analysis invites caution. Important and innovative as the work of Lise McKean (1996) is, one could easily gain the impression that all gurus are to be tarred with the same Hindutva brush and also lose sight of the wide-ranging devotional subjectivities in play that are irreducible to a functionalist understanding of Hindutva-guruship remediation and interoperation (Kim 2010). A recent social biography of the career of a renowned religious image composed of portraits of 42 'Immortal Gurus of *Bhārata*' (Voix 2023) provides a helpful starting point for considering, via a very specific kind of visual media, the ambivalences and nuances characteristic of the relationship between Hindu nationalism and gurus. The technical composition of the image is highly congruent with the VHP's vision of 'a simplified, easily comprehensible, and commonly accessible Hinduism, understood as a. . .set of common symbolic denominators acceptable across sects' (Hansen 1999, p. 101). If 'the "modern gurus" [of the VHP] do not emphasise their sectarian affiliation but rather their "Hindu" allegiance' (Jaffrelot 1996, p. 196), then we witness here how such a flattening can be accomplished artistically, that is, the original portraits are extracted from their socio-religious contexts of origin with the removal of visual marks and gestures that reveal sectarian affiliation. Such visual decontextualization—'suppress[ing] an ornament, a necklace, a staff or a sectarian insignia'—removes much of what gave the original portraits their meaning, rendering the composite image 'mono-iconic' (Voix 2023, p. 159). Yet, a synergistic reading of the relationship between the 'Immortal Gurus' image and the agenda of national Hinduism is only one possible interpretation of a composition marked by striking semiotic virtuosity (Voix 2023, p. 175). Understood by diverse constituencies in different ways, the image can also stand for a tolerant 'Hindu

humanism' and egalitarianism, for instance, it features both the iconoclastic weaver Kabir and Shankaracharya, the archetypal symbol of Brahmanical hegemony, placing them on an equivalent footing.

The triangular interactive relationship between Hindutva, media and guruship (as a set of concepts and logics as well as of specific persons) is evidently multi-layered and multi-scalar. It is important to grasp that Hindutva is fractally structured via self-similar guru principles (which it thereby mediates) at different scales and that Hindutva is itself mediated by particular human gurus; however, a further key significance of Voix's work is its reminder that there is no essential or inevitable relationship between Hindutva and guruship. On the one hand, Hindutva attitudes to guruship are not monolithic: contrasting attitudes towards gurus mark boundaries between the strikingly differentiated sets of groups and alliances that cohere under the banner of Hindu nationalism. For instance, representing a more austere version of Hindutva, Arun Shourie broke ranks and criticised the crass commercialisation of present-day public gurus who 'presid[e] over empires' (Lucia 2022, p. 12). On the other hand, Dalit gurus have sought to dismantle Hindutva and Brahmanical Hinduism entirely (Ikegame 2022); numerous radical bhakti saints have put forth powerful visions of community beyond conventional hierarchical norms (Omvedt 2008); various modern guru organisations and philosophies embody forms of cosmopolitanism that include 'a philosophical orientation toward difference, cultivation of displacement. . .and tolerance for difference in everyday practice' (Khandelwal 2012, p. 219) and provide critiques of Hindutva reason (Warrier 2005; McLain 2012); and novelists (Gupta 2011), artists (e.g., Gulammohammed Sheikh[43]) and others have sought to rebuild a vision of composite religiosity after episodes of communal violence by invoking precisely the figure of the guru as 'an example of identity in reverse' (Ramnath 2022) or 'crowd of narratives' capable of counteracting Hindutva dreams of singularity.[44] Can gurus, despite everything, prototype a coming *disidentity politics* (Copeman 2023)?

The South Indian portraits of Christ as guru explored in work by Emma Dawson Varughese (2023), which raise poignant questions about the translation and transposition of guruship idioms, are pertinent here. What visual styles and gestures make a guru figure manifest? What colour palettes and artistic media are appropriate for bringing the entities of Christ and guru into complex imagistic relation? The images examined by Dawson Varughese—an oil painting (1993), a concrete-moulded tableau (2003), a mosaic installation (1974) and two additional paintings in different styles—instantiate, she suggests, 'encounters of inculturation'. Typically picturing Christ the guru as a seated figure, either meditating or teaching, they mediate between Christian, Hindu and Buddhist religious traditions. The powerful confluences communicated in these resonant images suggest to the author Voss Roberts's (2021, p. 347) evocation of 'a place of silence', a place 'beyond doctrines, where the traditions meet'. On one level concepts of guruship seem readily, even glibly, transposable, from business gurus (Rhodes and Pitsis 2008) to beauty gurus (Lewis et al. 2016) and beyond. But given the frequently contentious colonial and postcolonial history of Hindu–Christian relations in South Asia, sensitive questions are raised here. If the recent commission of 'translation images' featuring Christ as a guru is apparently straightforward evidence of attempts to build bridges between different religious groups, such images might be conceived differently for other historical moments as semiotic appropriation.[45]

Alexander Henn's (2015) analysis of the Christian Purana literature in early modern Goa documents Jesuit attempts to make Christian concepts intelligible by using Hindu names. Central here was the relaying of biblical stories in Konkani-Marathi in a manner stylistically borrowed from the Hindu bhakti poet saints, Sri Sant Ekanatha (1533–1599), in particular. Yet, though on one level this was indeed a mode of translation-cum-dialogue, it also aimed at displacement. On a popular level, however, it is true that non-superficial correspondences and borrowings did develop in South India between Hindu saints, Christian saints and martyrs and Muslim *pir*s (Bayly 1989). The Jesuits in Tamil Nadu, for instance, were able quite successfully to position Catholicism as 'a devotional *bhakti* order based on the teachings

of Jesuit renouncer-gurus' (Mosse 2012, p. 18). One way in which we can see the images of Christ the guru analysed by Dawson Varughese, then, is as figures of translation that help us move beyond tenacious conceptions of religious traditions as fully constituted self-enclosed universes and intercultural exchange as mere encounter (Das 2012).[46]

Martin Fuchs (2022, p. 172) rightly points to the hollowness of many gurus' claims of ecumenism and universal humanness, which are rarely matched by practice. Even in the case of egalitarian bhakti gurus, what is offered to the marginalised would-be devotee is frequently what Fuchs aptly terms a 'confined universalism' that is incapable of sustaining wider Dalit recognition or hopes for advancement (175). Jeffery Long (2019), on the other hand, questions 'the tendency of some authors to identify Hindu pluralism, paradoxically, with a kind of Hindu triumphalism' (8), finding in the Bengal saint Ramakrishna's multireligious mysticism evidence of a genuine, deep-rooted Hindu ecumenism—neither 'neo-Hindu' nor a mere product of colonialism—that can stand as a promising alternative to communalism and for the promotion of interreligious understanding (8, 21). What is more, Ikegame asks searching questions concerning whether ecumenism has any value at all for certain gurus and their followers. Responding to Orianne Aymard's (2014, p. 257) argument that 'openness, inclusiveness and moving away from narrowly defined caste rules is the key to cult survival following the death of the guru', Ikegame (2016, p. 117) states that lower-caste devotional movements 'for centuries remained strong [precisely] because their gurus—dead or alive—speak [only] for their caste communities'.

It is a testament to the complex plurality of guruship that in spite of gurus' central position within systems of Brahmanical domination, multiple entanglements with Hindutva and the often-fictional nature of their ecumenical universalism (Fuchs 2022), they are still capable of emerging in the ways we have discussed as figures of hope and promise able pedagogically and ideologically to mediate secular, non-polarising possibilities. Discussing a Shaiva sect in Uttar Pradesh, Bouillier (2020, pp. 31–32) shows how such hope and its failure can be extremely closely entwined, since it was the sect's very openness to Dalits and other marginalised communities that led—when its leaders embraced Hindutva—to the creation of a large, caste-transcending voter constituency for the BJP in the state. Indeed, the kind of hope that remains invested in gurus perhaps recalls Hirokazu Miyazaki's (2004) argument about the intimate relationship between promise and failure: 'a promise, if it were to be fulfilled, would not be a promise' (Cohen 2013, p. 325). Arjun Appadurai (2007, p. 30) writes that 'the address of hope as a collective sentiment' engages 'the space between *is and ought*'. Deeply entangled with Hindutva and other forms of domination, yet irreducible to them, there remains embedded within the institution of guruship a 'cluster of promises' (Berlant 2011, p. 23) that enable it productively to engage precisely the space identified by Appadurai and so to maintain a relation to the future as a possible mediator between the (communal) environment one is in and the (unconditionally plural) environment one might wish to create. In this, we might say that they form the object of what Lauren Berlant terms 'cruel optimism', the 'condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object [and] compromised conditions of possibility' (24).

We conclude with a note on our use of the term 'more-than-guru' (and the related 'guru but *not only*'). Employed above in reference to Modi, we suggest that they might also form part of a descriptive vocabulary for addressing the sorts of gurus who constantly seem to spill over categorial distinctions, multiplying roles, capacities and affinities, thereby contributing to what can seem like the promiscuous profusion of the world of public gurus. Gesturing towards the baroque 'sensuous materiality' of the contemporary public guru who is not confined to, or locked within, standard definitions of guruship but flows out in many directions, blurring the distinction between guru and various other categories, these terms can complement and extend our earlier notion of uncontainability[47] as means for making more explicit the excessive-cum-hybridising actions of public gurus who, borrowing from Gellner (2019), may be termed *masters of hybridity* for their ability to move across categories of religion, politics, business, development and entertainment, working with each of them—taking resources from one category to build in another (see ibid, p. 275)[48]. Such concepts are

unlikely to satisfy scholars critical of our earlier notion of uncontainability for 'dislocat[ing] certitude as to who the guru is'[49]. For that is precisely the point: the category of 'guru' is indeed challenged by the kind of figure who is a guru but *not only*. To be sure, such figures are far from being the only kind of guru—traditional varieties, based on the Indic model of teacher–student relationships within the space of religious institutions, remain highly significant—but it would be remiss to disregard those that trouble categorial distinctions on account of our own desire for definitional 'certitude'. Neither are such gurus a wholly new phenomenon (see e.g., Pinch 2012 on gurus as military commanders in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries), for 'the religious field has never been contained in isolation' (Lucia 2021, p. 413). Emperor Akbar, to take a famous case, began to be depicted in the 1570s as a fusion of Hindu guru, Sufi *pir* and emperor (Pinch 2012, p. 75). However, the 'new guru *seva*' of the last decades, which travels both 'to' and 'through' the guru to 'humanity' (Copeman 2009; Lucia 2014b; Beckerlegge 2015), coupled with intensified entrepreneurial engagements (Longkumer 2018; Bhattacharya 2023) that generate novel 'guru-empires' (Lucia 2022, p. 12), set within and finessed by an ever diversifying media landscape (Upadhyay 2022; Copeman et al. 2023), have only increased the expansive, hybridising capacities of restive public and would-be public gurus. Such spillover guruship fails to respect the formal boundaries of Latour's 'modern constitution' (Latour 1991; Gellner 2019, p. 278). Both stepping across conceptual divisions and translating between them (Khare 1984; Copeman 2009, chp. 6; Srinivas 2010), the Indic guru has always constitutively mixed together the human and non-human, 'without bracketing anything off, allowing themselves any potential combination!' (Latour 1991, p. 61). Excess, however, obviously demands limits in order to be intelligible. It follows that, in many cases, boundaries and divisions are positively required by contemporary public gurus since it is their disregard for them that both evidences and enhances their power, affirming the 'ontological excess' (De la Cadena 2014, p. 256), or 'allness', of more-than-guru personhood. If our approach here risks amplifying the stories such gurus tell about themselves, endorsing their own self-narrativization, we follow Lucia (2014a, p. 245) in emphasising that the reality of gurus' excessive subjecthood is one that is very much constructed (see Copeman et al. 2023, which sets out an array of gurus' different *methodologies of presence*). The analyst's task is to shed light on the means by which such a reality is produced, the nature of devotee engagements with it, and its political effects—including but not limited to those entwined with Hindutva agendas.

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Notes

1 Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the 'Indian People's Party', is a Hindu nationalist party founded in 1980. Currently in power in the centre.

2 Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the 'World Hindu Council', was founded in 1964. Pursues a staunchly Hindutva-based agenda.

3 See the insightful related discussion by John Zavos (2012).

4 The phrasing borrows from Fuchs's (2022, p. 175) stimulating discussion of the triangular relationship between God/the Divine, layperson and guru/saint–poet.

5 'Guru logics' refers to the variety of thematics and conceptual schema generated by guruship, and its capacity—as a set of principles as much as specific persons—to participate in, and move between, multiple social and conceptual domains (Copeman and Ikegame 2012).

6 See Copeman and Quack (2019) on bi-instrumentalism.

7 This point follows Klem and Suykens (2018).

8 RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), the 'Association of National Volunteers', is a militant, highly disciplined Hindu nationalist organisation that is treated as a moral authority by other Hindutva groups. Beginning as a 'sons of the soil' movement, the Shiv Sena is a nativist political party based in Maharashtra that espouses a particularly virulent and Islamaphobic brand of Hindutva.

9 'A telecoms engineer based in the southern city of Bangalore, Mr Zubair co-founded Alt News in 2017 with former software engineer Pratik Sinha to combat fake news. Over the past five years, the website has played a key role in debunking claims that spread disinformation about religion and caste and unscientific myths.' https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-62093974 (accessed on 9 February 2023). See also: 'Zubair gets 14 more days in custody for calling Hindutva leaders facing hate charges "hatemongers"', *The Wire*, 5 July 2022, https://thewire.in/law/zubair-remanded-for-14-more-days-for-calling-hindutva-leaders-facing-hate-charges-hatemongers, and 'Mahant Bajrang Muni Das arrested days after giving rape threats to Muslim women in UP's Sitapur', *First Post*, 13 April 2022. https://www.firstpost.com/india/mahant-bajrang-muni-das-arrested-days-after-giving-rape-threats-to-muslim-women-in-ups-sitapur-10553531.html (both accessed on 9 February 2023).

10 Consider also the further meta-media controversy that took place in 2016 when the comedian Kiku Sharda was arrested (once more under section 295A of the Indian Penal Code) following a TV sketch in which he mimicked the Dera Sacha Sauda guru Gurmeet Ram Rahim serving liquor and dancing with girls. Once more the criminal behaviour that seemed to matter most was not so much the guru's serial rape of his female devotees, murder of a critical journalist and castration of his close male associates (Tripathi 2018)—though the guru was eventually convicted of the first two of these and is currently serving a life sentence—as a comic's mocking reference to some of this behaviour. See Copeman and Banerjee (2019, chp. 6) on controversies concerning this guru.

11 The concept of the guru as an inclusive singularity is developed in Copeman and Ikegame (2012, pp. 307–8).

12 See Basu (2015, p. 185) on Asaram Bapu's participation in Hindutva politics and some of the charges against him. He is currently in prison in Rajasthan (Lucia 2023). See also Copeman and Ikegame (2012, p. 292).

13 See https://www.trendsmap.com/twitter/tweet/1540889774982062082 (accessed on 28 March 2023). See Copeman (2018).

14 See Copeman and Hagström (2022) on the filmic exposé techniques used to debunk the guru in one of his first controversies.

15 A Hindu sage or saint.

16 Vasishtha and Vishvamitra form part of the *Saptarishi* group of 'seven sages' in Vedic texts and the Upanishads. Valmiki's Ramayana describes Vasishtha as the family priest of the Ikshvaku dynasty who taught Ram and his brothers royal family duties.

17 The second-highest civilian award in the Republic of India.

18 *New Indian Express*, 27 August 2017.

19 Inaugurated in 1985, the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports bestows the award annually 'to the person who not only works as a mentor but chalks out the path a prodigy traverses on his way to stardom' (https://olympics.com/en/featured-news/dronacharya-award-given-india-coaches-excellence-first-recipient, accessed on 9 February 2023).

20 A pracharak is a full-time worker of the RSS.

21 A Delhi satellite but also a global centre in its own right that is 'home to the local offices of half the Fortune 500 companies'.

22 *Mint*, 16 April 2016.

23 *The Hindu*, 12 April 2016. This rationale has been challenged by another widely held view, namely, 'that nomads used to hoard jaggery [*gur*] in the village in order to survive hard times during floods in the adjoining Yamuna river' (*Mint*, 16 April 2016).

24 Facebook 2016, 'Ekalavya Speaks'. https://www.facebook.com/EkalavyaNarratives/?ref=page_internal (accessed on 9 February 2023).

25 Sukanya Shantha, 'As symbols of discrimination fall worldwide, meet the women who blackened Manu's statue', *The Wire*, 14 June 2020 (https://thewire.in/rights/kantabai-ahire-sheela-pawar-manu-statue-blackened-protest, accessed on 9 February 2023).

26 Much more could be written about the guru-like status of Dr Ambedkar. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism in 1956 is especially relevant. In the creation of icons and imageries for the newly converted Buddhist community as part of a process of neo-Buddhist mythologisation, the epithet 'Maitreya' was attributed to Ambedkar, which 'carried significance in the movement he founded, for Buddhist tradition held that after the death of the Sakyamuni (the historical Buddha) another Buddha, or Bodhisattva (perfectly enlightened being), called Maitreya would appear on earth to bring a renewed enlightenment' (Tartakov 1990, p. 410). On the other hand, Tartakov emphasises that the strikingly modern sartorial elements embedded in the iconography of Ambedkar make three key points: 'this is a city man, a man of learning, and *only* a man—not a god' (ibid: 411).

27 By burning the Manusmriti, anti-caste and Ambedkarite activists resist the hegemony of Brahmanism, inclusive of both caste-Hindu domination and Hindutva. Unlike secular and left-liberal opposition, which sees Hinduism as different from Hindutva,

Ambedkarites see both Hinduism and Hindutva as part of Brahmanism. See also Fuchs (2022) on Dalit resistance towards Brahmanical guru figures.

[28] Copeman and Ikegame (2012). Sri Aurobindo famously declared India to be 'the guru of nations, the physician of Europe's maladies' (Nanda 2003).

[29] See Nanda (2016, p. 16). 'Jagat' means 'world' or 'universe'.

[30] Though we might also recall here the evident influence on Modi of M.S. Golwalkar.

[31] We are influenced here by the work of Marisol De la Cadena, in particular her essay 'Runa: Human but *not only*' (2014).

[32] *Dera*—the extended residential site of an influential figure—usually has similar connotations to 'ashram'.

[33] The term borrows from Corsín Jiménez's (2023) proposal for a 'spillover sociology' the better to take account of the non-contained nature of social life.

[34] See Duggal (2022) on the DSS guru and image politics.

[35] On Baba Ramdev as a case study in guru-led development nationalism, see Longkumer (2018), Gupta and Copeman (2019) and Bhattacharya (2023).

[36] For this, see Copeman (2009) and Copeman and Duggal (2023a).

[37] For further details, see Copeman and Duggal (2023b).

[38] 'The victors in India's modern spiritual market', notes Prabhu Chawla in 'Spiritual caste divisions create gurus with Moolah, Hooplah and violent followers', *New Indian Express* (27 August 2017), '[d]espite variations in style and substance' have in common their great admiration for Narendra Modi, 'who reciprocates their admiration by gracing their public events with his presence'.

[39] 'BAPS participates in video conference of spiritual leaders with Prime Minister Modi, India', 30 March 2020. https://www.baps.org/News/2020/BAPS-Participates-in-Video-Conference-of-Spiritual-Leaders-with-Prime-Minister-Modi-18657.aspx (accessed on 10 February 2023).

[40] See, for example, 'Sadhguru offers simple yogic practices to increase oxygen levels and boost immunity in COVID times', *Free Press Journal*, 29 April 2021, https://www.freepressjournal.in/india/sadhguru-offers-simple-yogic-practices-to-increase-oxygen-levels-and-boost-immunity-in-covid-times (accessed on 10 February 2023). Solomon (2021) explains that, in the hospital where he conducted fieldwork in Mumbai, even before COVID-19 'rationing ventilators [was] the norm and not the exception'. See Frøystad (2021) on gurus and Hindu rituals during the pandemic and McCartney (2021).

[41] For further discussion of this point, see Copeman and Ikegame (2012).

[42] Narendra, Nayak. 'Don't Believe Claims of 100% Cure for COVID-19'. *Mangalore Today*, 23 June 2020, Available online: https://www.mangaloretoday.com/mainnewsprint/Don-rsquo-t-believe-claims-of-100-cure-for-Covid-19-Narendra-Nayak.html (accessed on 10 February 2023).

[43] Essence of My Art: Gulammohammed Sheikh in Conversation with Vasudevan Akkitham. *Sahapedia*, 18 March 2020, Available online: https://www.sahapedia.org/essence-my-art-gulammohammed-sheikh-conversation-vasudevan-akkitham (accessed on 10 February 2023).

[44] 'Crowd of narratives' is borrowed from Salman Rushdie's usage in the BBC radio programme 'Free Thinking' (14 October 2015).

[45] For further elaboration of these points, see Das and Copeman (2015).

[46] See also the rich tradition of Christian ashram movements documented by Ralston (1989), Aguilar (2016), Štipl (2020) and others.

[47] For a detailed elucidation of the concept, see Copeman and Ikegame (2012).

[48] The first part of the sentence (that on sensuous materiality) borrows from Kwa's (2002, p. 26) work on Romantic and baroque conceptions of complex wholes.

[49] See Keul and Raman's (2022, p. 3) account in their introduction to a recent edited book on the generation of gurus. Relatedly these authors would also restrict analysis to individual gurus (in the sense of bounded biological organisms) and their specific histories. We do not for a moment question the import of studies of particular gurus and guru movements, but argue that it is vital, too, to recognise and explore how forms and principles of guruship become distributed within and beyond a multitude of non-human artefacts and spaces (Copeman et al. 2023). Moreover, the different aesthetic-devotional means by which splitting, doubling and proliferation of particular guru figures take place and the sometimes surprising and unpredictable motion of guru logics and presences (e.g., Longkumer 2023) are themselves historically significant processes.

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