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## Governing with a lockdown beard: the COVID-19 crisis as a laboratory for Narendra Modi's Hindutva

David Landau and Nina Rageth

### Introduction

During the first two waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Indian prime minister Narendra Modi orchestrated a dramatic makeover of his image. Between approximately March 2020 and September 2021, he replaced his signature outfit – the sharp tailored Nehru jacket and kurta, designer glasses and luxury watches, and the carefully cropped beard and meticulous haircut – with a look that drew from the saintly idiom. In doing so, he effected an aesthetic transformation that had far-reaching significance for relations between the Indian state and Hinduism. Modi started appearing in public and in social media posts attired in the fashion of Hindu gurus, with increasingly long hair and a long, unkempt beard. By adopting this image, Modi ingeniously cultivated the symbolic language of gurus and used it during the crisis to articulate his political ambitions. This new look served perfectly to complement, strengthen and promote his agenda of elevating Hindu nationalism in Indian politics. Modi developed a visual grammar that communicated a congruous parallel between the length of his beard and his commitment to Hindutva ideologies. The longer the beard, the sharper the majoritarianism; the shorter the beard, the more emphasis on 'politics as usual'. This chapter focuses on Modi's performance of the Hindu guru as a way to understand the shifting contours of Indian politics, taking into consideration both the immense power that the figure of the Hindu guru holds in India and the central position that Modi himself occupies on the national stage.

In contemporary India, Hindu gurus are a ubiquitous phenomenon. Unlike other Hindu religious experts such as ritual specialists (*pujārī*) or temple priests (*purohit*), the guru is a teacher and counsellor. There are sectarian gurus, middle-class gurus, New Age gurus (Rudert 2010), local gurus, global gurus (Altglas 2007; Bauman 2012; Waghorne 2009, 2014, 2017), cosmopolitan gurus (Aravamudan 2006), high-profile gurus (Warrier 2005), vernacular gurus and anglophone gurus. There is a veritable guru market featuring competition, innovation and the possibility of choice (Lucia 2014b; Warrier 2003a). They show different organisational modes which are captured in terms such as ‘devotional order’ (Copeman 2009, 1), ‘guru movements’ (Spurr 2016), ‘guru organizations’ (Warrier 2003a, 2003b) or ‘guru-centered associations’ (Waghorne 2014, 187). One shared key feature of gurus is, as Copeman and Ikegame convincingly argue, their ‘uncontainability’ (2012a, 291). Jacob Copeman and Aya Ikegame describe gurus as ‘domain crosser[s] par excellence’ (2012a, 324). Gurus appear in a multitude of social arenas. They act as leaders of humanitarian projects (Copeman 2009; Lucia 2014a), experts in the medical domain (Rageth 2018), defenders of environmental concerns, promoters of well-being (Khalikova 2017; Goldberg and Singleton 2014) and finally, as we discuss in this chapter, they participate in politics.

One concern of this chapter is to uncover how Narendra Modi enacts the Hindu guru, closely examining the visual aesthetics but also considering the rhetorical possibilities of the guru figure. Writing about the broad phenomenon of gurus, Copeman and Ikegame convincingly argue that a primary strategy for showcasing guruship is mimesis of canonical markers of the guru. This makes performativity and theatricality aspects crucial for grasping the guru phenomenon (Copeman and Ikegame 2012b, 8). ‘Dressing up’, they state, ‘enacts the very structure of performance and impersonation by which all guruship is assumed’ (2012b, 8). In this vein, they argue that “[g]uru culture” comprises a particularly dense complex of imitative registers’ (Copeman and Ikegame 2012a, 297). These ‘registers’ are not to be confused with an invariable set of codes, or, in their words, ‘the guru does not refer to a consistent body of knowledge and practice’ (2012a, 324). Rather, guruship comprises certain logics, ‘the guru logics’ (Copeman and Ikegame 2012a), which aspiring gurus are to reproduce. Following this argument, we discuss Modi’s novel appearance as a form of performance. By imitating the figure of the Hindu guru, Modi benefits from the power that the figure of the Hindu guru has garnered in the last century.

Scholars have observed and examined the figure and political phenomenon of Modi from a variety of angles, which has yielded a large body of research. Christophe Jaffrelot (2021b) recently published a

voluminous monograph which scrupulously documents and analyses Modi's capture of power. A number of scholars have focused on Modi's use of social media and other technologies such as the holographic speeches (Baishya 2015; Menon 2014; Rai 2019; Rao 2018). Research has been done on the relationship between Modi's popularisation of yoga, as in his inauguration of the International Yoga Day, Hindutva politics, and global spirituality (Jain 2020). Sanjay Srivastava (2015) applies a gender perspective to examine Modi's masculinity, which he intersects with forms of new consumerist aspirations. And, to mention one more perspective, others focused on the situation of minorities, especially the Muslim minority since Modi's election (Waikar 2018; Wright 2015). Although research has offered a range of insights and perspectives into Modi's character, this scholarship has so far not given focused attention to his enactment of the Hindu guru. Analysing the figure of the Hindu guru and Modi's employment of its many symbolic layers serves to untangle Modi's agenda of ideology and populism. Although there are aspects of Modi's much-discussed 'strongman' politics and the performance of the Hindu guru that overlap, there are notable differences, particularly regarding the guru's capacity to forge a new kind of Hindutva politics that departs from India's original democratic framework. Moreover, the Modi-as-guru figure resonates differently with the public from Modi-as-strongman, and the guru holds the potential to reach an even wider audience. We hold that there is no parallel figure in India which is as widely understood and recognised as the Hindu god-man. In other words, the guru figure resonates throughout and across different areas and communities in India, which turns it into a particularly powerful figure.

In this chapter, we place Modi's changing outward appearance – including his beard – in the wider context of his Hindutva project to restructure Hindu and Indian identity. An examination of Modi's Hindutva reveals it as promoting a homogenised version of Hinduism, which is fuelled by a need to dominate Indian culture. We understand his embodiment of the figure of the guru, or the guru prime minister, as merging two aspects of his Hindutva, namely the original revivalist credo of Hindu nationalism, and a strongman style of politics championed by Modi himself. Exponents of neo-Hinduism such as Vivekananda, Gandhi or Aurobindo, to name a few highly prominent figures, all displayed religious and political aspirations and acted as religious and political representatives. Modi's experiment with blending religious and political symbols is different in that it is an attempt at gaining more power than is contained in any singular frame of reference, political or religious. Modi reached the position of prime minister thanks to his successful political

career and now he is expanding his aura to include the figure of the guru. Other figures, such as Vivekananda and Aurobindo, used the capital they accumulated through their religious activities to influence the sphere of politics. Gandhi is harder to categorise, as it seems his political and spiritual activities developed in tandem and were complementary. Modi's combination of prime minister and figure of religious authority is brand new and holds the potential for far-reaching changes in Indian politics.

The COVID-19 crisis has been an opportunity to speed up processes that were already taking place: erosion of democratic principles, strengthening of the Modi cult, and detachment from challenging realities such as the economic crisis and tensions with China. Modi has used these crises to test, refine and calibrate different combinations of religious and political symbols, potentially setting Indian politics on a new course. In this chapter, we focus on the context of Modi's transformation, then discuss the figure of the guru that he draws upon. We move on to discussing the dynamics of gurus and politics in India before suggesting some possible motivations for Modi's dramatic shift, and its possible implications.

## Modi's shape shifting

### Adopting the imagery of the Hindu guru

During the COVID-19 pandemic, India's prime minister Narendra Modi dramatically changed his appearance. Before the pandemic, Modi's self-presentation emphasised traditional values alongside advocacy of economic progress and state development, while occasionally flirting with Hindu symbols. In the first year or so after the outbreak of the virus, Modi presented himself as a white-bearded guru, dressing in the style of Indian holy men and growing a long and at times ragged beard. It is impossible to pinpoint the exact beginning of Modi's makeover, but it occurred at some point during the first national lockdown, which started at the end of March 2020. Indeed, the first commentaries on Modi's new look called it a 'lockdown look' or 'lockdown beard' (Sikander 2020). And though we too believe that the adoption of a new look was tightly connected to the lockdown, or more precisely to the humanitarian crisis unfolding in India because of the pandemic, we argue that this transformation was not the result of the rupture in normality. Rather, Modi used the extraordinary situation as a testing ground for a new kind of politics.

Modi's aesthetic transformation did not come unexpectedly. It followed the trajectory of his image management: a strategy of continuous

shape shifting producing a number of public identities that sometimes replace one another, sometimes coexist, and sometimes contradict and sometimes complement each other (on Modi's image making see [Baishya 2015](#); [Pal 2015](#); [Rai 2019](#); [R. Sen 2016](#); [Srivastava 2015](#)).<sup>1</sup> Modi's guru look was immaculate. Part of its power was the minute attention to detail with which Modi (and presumably his team) styled his public persona. This attention to detail ensured that every viewer with a sense of guru ascetics would immediately recognise Modi's new persona. One of the early dramatic guru enactments took place on 5 April in 2020, on the ninth day of India's first lockdown. Modi was shown on major Indian TV channels such as *India Today* lighting a *diyā*, an oil lamp, in silence, engaging in darshan, gazing at a devotional object, and performing a nine-minute act of solidarity with and for the nation (*India Today* 2020). This spectacle framed Modi as a spiritually devout man, in humble clothing, a lone seeker with nobody but his mother at his side. This moment roughly marks the beginning of Modi's employment of guru aesthetics. Moreover, it was a rare occasion on which Modi not only appeared as a guru but also acted like one. Most of his public appearances during the pandemic were in the guru garb but his actions were of a political nature. Moreover, as we discuss below, Modi expressed his shift predominantly through visual aesthetics, and he did not invest in the adaptation of his linguistic register. It seems that in a media-saturated society the visual image is Modi's most powerful tool to promulgate his image makeover.

Modi started to experiment with the guru motif at the beginning of the pandemic by drawing on the canonical marker of the guru's long beard. As mentioned above, following Copeman and Ikegame (2012a, 2012b), performativity and mimesis are crucial aspects of modern guru-hood. The visibly growing beard, coupled with a traditional Hindu wardrobe, served as a clear message of a new turn in his public persona. He appeared with loose-fitting clothes, choosing a new cut and traditional-looking fabrics. This sartorial flair was reminiscent of both modern gurus in the trajectory of Vivekananda and pre-colonial courtly dress ([Houghteling 2017](#)). The clothes were often in earthy colours and expressed comfort and opulence. On specific occasions he even presented himself wearing saffron, a colour that signals renunciation, or initiation into a monastic order, especially into a Shaivite sect (*sampradāya*); moreover, it is the representative colour of the Hindu right ([Jha 2014](#)). It became rare for him to be photographed without a shawl or a scarf. A good example of his sage-like appearance is a photo circulated on his social media accounts and in different newspapers that depicts him addressing the Indo-Japan Samwad Conference via video in December

2020. He is shown in a garden with a statue of the Buddha behind him wearing a perfectly ironed simple white shirt and a colourful shawl placed very neatly over his left shoulder (Mukhopadhyay 2021). The placing of the shawl is unmistakably evoking religious garb in which only one shoulder is covered.

Along with his new clothing style, Modi played with the guru's haircut and beard. Throughout the different stages of growth and trimming, his hairstyle and beard were of great public interest and evoked different interpretations. This is not surprising, hairstyle and type of beard being recognisable indicators of religious life and religious authority in the Indian context. Modi's shoulder-long groomed hair and at times ragged beard were part of his new sannyasi-esque appearance, clearly employing the style of famous Hindu gurus such as Mahesh Yogi, Sri Sri Ravi Sankar, Sadhguru and Baba Ramdev, and contrasting with the monk-like style of Yogi Adityanath with his shaven head. 'Well maintained long hair and beard' is suggestive of a person 'who is in the world, but not of the world, someone who leads a celibate and simple life, but is not extreme in asceticism and not circumscribed by the minutiae of a specific monastic order' (Jacobs 2015, 132–3). Modi was experimenting with his image by testing both 'worldliness' and asceticism, positioning himself 'in the world, but not of the world' by letting his beard grow ragged at times (especially during the March–April 2021 West Bengal elections), and at times appearing with a flowing but well-groomed beard.

Some commenters claimed he was so busy dealing with the pandemic that he did not have time for a haircut, while others speculated that he had undertaken a vow not to cut his hair until the construction of the Ram Mandir temple in Ayodhya was completed (Babu 2020). However, Modi was ridiculed for trying to associate himself with historical figures. For example, in April 2021, during the election campaign in West Bengal, when his beard was at its most unruly stage, his look was compared with that of the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore. His main opponent in West Bengal, Mamta Banerjee, ridiculed Modi's beard and look: 'The Indian economy has gone for a toss. There is no industrial growth. There is no growth except for the beard of Narendra Modiji. At times he dresses like Rabindranath Tagore and at times like Mahatma Gandhi' (*The Economic Times* 2021).<sup>2</sup>

While Modi is clearly experimenting with the image of the Hindu guru, linking this image to specific historical figures, as Mamta Banerjee does, simplifies the issue.<sup>3</sup> The image of the Hindu guru is so variegated that rooting its origin in one specific figure is impossible. It is more instructive to employ Deleuze and Guattari's image of a rhizome in order

to think of gurus as forming assemblages out of shared symbols (Deleuze and Guattari 2003). When Modi appears as a guru, he evokes a multitude of references. He is both a humble spiritual seeker and a wise teacher, both a sage from Hinduism's golden past and a modern worldly guru. A rhizome has no origin, no chain of events and no direction of development. Rather, the roots intertwine and feed into each other, making a genealogy impossible. There are certainly distinct figures that left potent imprints on that image and shaped its form-taking, an exemplary case being Gandhi. Gandhi established key characteristics such as asceticism, self-discipline and selfless service, which invites a reading of Modi's new appearance as an imitation of Gandhi (see for example Jaffrelot 2021b, 463). However, though similarities between Modi and Gandhi abound, there are also remarkable differences, and it does not seem helpful to brush them aside.<sup>4</sup> Rather than reading Modi's new mode of self-representation as a copy of one distinct guru persona, we suggest reading Modi's appearance as the mimicking of 'guru logics' (Copeman and Ikegame 2012a), which brings together the influences of different guru personas, establishing a solid framework for guruship within which Modi acts.

### From virile ruler to ascetic guru

Modi's guru-esque appearance is particularly striking when contrasted with the pre-guru image of Modi as the decisive leader. Modi's 'persona as the savior of the country' (Kaul 2017, 531) consisted of an ingenious mixture of the business-friendly entrepreneur, the clever developer and the solid traditionalist. Market-led development and liberalisation, prosperity and progression for India: such were the key promises that Modi made during the election campaign and in the aftermath of the 2014 general elections, echoing economic ideals of the post-1990s. The hashtag #acchedin (good days [are coming]) encapsulates the dominant electoral rhetoric and gives a sense of Modi's performance as the harbinger of a historical period marked by India's resurrection after years of Congress rule (Kaur 2015; Menon 2014; Rai 2019). He cultivated a larger-than-life image manifested in different ways, such as the suit emblazoned with his name which he donned for meeting Barack Obama in 2015.<sup>5</sup> He promotes grand projects, such as the construction and inauguration of the statue of Sardar Patel, the world's largest, and his multibillion-dollar project to redevelop Lutyens's central vista in New Delhi. Modi was hardly ever seen wearing the common dress of Indian male politicians, that is, 'khadi or at least the colour white' (Chakrabarty 2001, 29). Instead, he was known for sporting a well-crafted look with the sharp kurta and Nehru jacket and the closely cropped beard.



Moreover, an integral part of the branding, suggestive of professionalism and efficacy, of economic aspirations and national pride, was the performance of hyper-masculinity. Modi cast an image of the broad-chested ruler, of a solid and potent body governing the nation. In Nigam's words, Modi 'was projected as one who is [a] stereotypically, alpha, muscular, macho, powerful, strong, megalomaniacal, metaphoric superman who could instill fear in his enemies' (Nigam 2018, unpaginated). Modi's '56-inch chest' became a stable reference in the election campaign to denote his virility and manhood (see Kinnvall 2019; Srivastava 2015).

However, alongside the larger-than-life persona that Modi projected, he also famously played with symbols of the Hindu saint. After his election, he was eager to foster the image of the celibate, kinless, abstinent and devout ascetic. This image is drawn in the official biographical story of Modi, which recounts how he renounced conventional ties by leaving his family and wife at the young age of 18, roaming through India and travelling to the Ramakrishna Mission in Belur Math, driven by a yearning to become a mendicant (*parivrājak*) (Marino 2014, 25–9). Moreover, Modi chooses to stage public acts which present him to the world as a person with particularly strong spiritual dispositions. Towards the end of the Lok Sabha election in May 2019, Modi chose to spend 15 hours meditating in a cave at the Kedarnath shrine. Photographs of Modi sitting cross-legged, eyes closed and covered with an orange shawl went viral (Elsa 2019). Modi's supporters are even known as devotees, as bhakts. This shows that the image of the ascetic guru was always part of the larger 'Modi myth' (Kaul 2017). However, it is a recent and notable phenomenon that the guru appearance is overriding other aspects of the previously multifarious Modi. While previously, as Kaul convincingly argues, Modi integrated the imaginaries of the 'ascetic, paternal, and decisive ruler' (Kaul 2017, 533), we witnessed for a moment a subtle but clear shift towards the exclusive enactment of the ascetic guru.

### Hindu gurus in Indian politics

At this point, a cursory examination of the figure of the Hindu guru in Indian politics is required to grasp and contextualise Modi's self-styling. As stated, the guru is a multifaceted, plural and flexible figure that evades all efforts at generalisation. Examining previous intersections between the guru figure and politics helps us to understand how Modi is acting within a familiar set-up and at the same time introducing a novel mode of the guru politician.

It is publicly acknowledged that many contemporary Hindu gurus often act in conjunction with the agenda of the current BJP government.

The affinity and consonance between Hindu gurus and BJP politicians have become particularly evident through saffron-clad gurus such as Baba Ramdev, a promoter of Hindutva ideologies (Chakraborty 2006, 2007; Jaffrelot 2011; Kanungo 2019; Khalikova 2017; Longkumer 2018; Sarbacker 2014). Baba Ramdev is an overt supporter of Modi and has ingeniously promoted loyalty to the nation above all. His vision of it is that it is a proud and self-sufficient nation, more precisely, a *Hindu* nation.<sup>6</sup> The phenomenon of Hindutva-sympathetic gurus is not limited to north India, but extends into the south of India, far beyond the BJP's Hindi belt. Jaggi Vasudev, better known as Sadhguru, whose headquarters are in Tamil Nadu, publicly displays his closeness to Narendra Modi and, reciprocally, Modi pays tribute to the southern yogi (Choudhury 2019). This alliance is made palpable when Jaggi Vasudev praises Modi for his Swachh Bharat Mission (Clean India Mission) (Republic Bharat 2018),<sup>7</sup> or when he speaks out in favour of the Citizenship Amendment Act (Chandra 2020), and in 2017 Modi travelled to the ashram's headquarters to unveil the so-called Adiyogi statue, a significant icon for Sadhguru's Isha foundation.<sup>8</sup> Obviously, not all current Hindu gurus are open supporters of BJP politics. However, many Hindu gurus further the growth of Hindu nationalism by spreading and commodifying the notion of the supremacy of Hindu spirituality and the image of Hinduism as a way of life rooted in the Indian nation-state.

The intersection of Hindu gurus and the political economy of Hindu nationalism has a long and complex history.<sup>9</sup> 'The volatile mixture of politics and religion' (Aravamudan 2006, 221) goes back to luminaries such as Vivekananda and the Ramakrishna Mission, Aurobindo, Tagore and Gandhi. These men shared a strong agenda of reforming Hinduism, invoking social transformations, and ultimately bringing about political change. Their ideology fused religious and national reformation to the extent that they would often become indistinguishable. These early reformers were Indian nationalists, and their main objective was the betterment of the nation (Chakraborty 2007, 1175; Jaffrelot 2012, 80). Their nationalist zeal was directed first and foremost towards resistance against British colonialism, and it did not carry the fascist overtones of the later Hindu nationalism. Nevertheless, their work to reform Hinduism and revitalise Hindu identity, and the centrality of ideas related to spirituality in their version of Indian nationalism, co-constituted the ground for the later emergence of Hindu nationalism (Beckerlegge 2000, 2006; Chakraborty 2007, 1174–80; Gold 1991; Katju 2003; McKean 1996; Van der Veer 2001, 47). It is striking to see that in recent years the BJP government has shown a renewed interest in such figures. It promotes

and celebrates them as early proponents of a Hindu nationalist ideology, even though many of these Hindu reformists clearly spoke out against a communalist ideology for which they are now instrumentalised. Perhaps the defining feature of RSS-style Hindu nationalism is its anti-minority discourse. Therefore, it is important to differentiate between early proponents of a Hindu nationalism that emphasised a pan-Indian identity and envisaged Hindus, alongside Muslims and other minorities, freed from colonialism, but was not based on enmity to the 'Other'. In particular, these early proponents of Hindu nationalism did not think of India as an exclusively Hindu nation. Under Modi's leadership there has been a campaign to rewrite the history of Hindu reform movements and to place different forms of Hindu nationalism that competed with the RSS during the decades leading up to independence under the umbrella of the RSS ideology. Hence, though it would be misleading to frame all Hindu reformers as early exponents of the current Hindu nationalist agenda, it is important to acknowledge the long-standing alliance between spirituality discourses and Hindu nationalism. Particularly relevant in this regard is the close association of early Hindu gurus and the RSS, the fountainhead of Hindu nationalism (founded in 1925 by K. B. Hedgewar) and the VHP (Vishva Hindu Parishad), a Hindu coalition fundamental to the development of militant Hindu nationalism (founded in 1964 by M. S. Golwalkar). Not only have some Hindu gurus been in favour of the ideologies of the Hindu right, but Hindu nationalist bodies have actively cultivated the figure of the Hindu guru as representative of the very type of Hinduism which they promoted.<sup>10</sup>

Returning to the present, it seems safe to say that the position of Hindu gurus in the political landscape is undergoing a shift. Though Hindu gurus have been a crucial voice in the ecosystem of authority since the independence movement, and have fostered a complicated alliance with Hindu nationalism, it is only recently that they have publicly exhibited their alliance with elected politicians, and, even more so, that they have themselves acted as political agitators. In the 2010s, during the anti-corruption campaign, Ramdev faced heavy criticism for his involvement in politics, 'for illegitimately mixing yogic spirituality with politics' (Copeman and Ikegame 2012a, 318). While until Modi came onto the national stage the guru-politician relationship was one of reciprocal support and mutual promotion, gurus have now started to be directly involved in political affairs. Since the ascendancy of the Hindu right in Indian politics, and particularly since Modi's election in 2014, politicians such as Yogi Adityanath (CM of Uttar Pradesh from 2018), Uma Bharati (MP from 2014 to 2019) and Sakshi Maharaj (MP from 2014) have overtly displayed their religious affiliations.<sup>11</sup> In other words,

a shift appears to be taking place which is erasing the division between politics and gurus, and we increasingly see figures who are both gurus and politicians. What we are witnessing is the merging of a Hindu guru and a politician in one and the same person.

Modi's orchestration of the Hindu guru marks the pinnacle of this development. When the Indian Prime Minister appears today as a Hindu guru, he is uniting both positions: he is king and king's guru, raja and raj guru. By blurring the boundary between the ruler and the spiritual adviser, he is circumventing an established division. He is creating a new and all-powerful position which has not gone unnoticed in Indian society and which has evoked – at least in some sections of the political landscape – disapproval and objection. Though power dynamics between religious and political leaders have certainly shaped Indian history, we still hold that what we are witnessing here is a new constellation. The emergence of a space in which religious and political power merge and overlap under Modi occurs within the context of conditions vastly different from the religion–politics interplay in previous periods. In the globalised age of the nation-state and digital technology, the consequences of the current confluence of religion and politics are potentially much greater.

Just looks?

Modi's transformation is most obvious in the visual aesthetics he employs. But what about his rhetoric? Is his makeover limited to the visual aspect of appearance, or has he also invested in the adaptation of his linguistic register? In order to examine the depth of Modi's makeover, we investigated his use of language. Specifically, we analysed the rhetoric in his monthly radio show *Mann Ki Baat* ('words from the heart') between spring 2020 and summer 2021, and compared it with the pre-pandemic content. We examined some of his political speeches, such as his addresses on Independence Day in August 2020 and 2021, and studied some of his many public appearances during the West Bengal election campaign in 2021. Also, we studied his Twitter and Facebook feeds, as well as the content of the Narendra Modi app.

An examination of Modi's utterances during the pandemic revealed no clear findings. Modi is a prolific social media user across different platforms and regularly gives speeches in different settings throughout India, one of his 'masterstroke[s] in the use of media' (Sharma and Dubey 2021, 535) being his very own radio programme *Mann Ki Baat*.<sup>12</sup> The sheer quantity of Modi's words serves to keep him at the centre of the nation's attention, but it can also serve to obscure changes, subtle or

otherwise. Our analysis did not expose discernible changes in his rhetorical strategies towards a more overtly guru-like tone. Because of the pandemic the tone and subject matter shifted, but there is no clear increase in religious references that could have been interpreted as a break from his previous utterances, such as quotes from religious texts, mention of mythological stories, claims of an unmediated connection to God, declarations of magical powers, emphasising a guru lineage, etc. In other words, there were religious references scattered throughout his speeches, but the number seems to be the same as in pre-pandemic times. We tread carefully here, since there is obviously space for an in-depth discourse analysis, but that is not the focus of this chapter. Further research would need to focus on Modi's rhetoric, including an analysis of the use of anecdotes, repetition, subject matter and other markers of guru discourses, rather than politicians' speech.

It seems that Modi's recasting as a Hindu guru is engineered mainly by focusing on the visual. Perhaps for a figure of Modi's stature the image and self-presentation might be more important than the texts and speeches themselves. The significance of the visual can be explained in terms of the media-saturated society in which current politics take place. With 340 million in the year 2020, India has the largest number of monthly Facebook users (Singh and Deep 2020, 2978). As at April 2023, Modi himself has 48 million followers on his Facebook page and almost 88 million Twitter followers, and he is the most followed sitting world leader on Instagram (Monteiro 2020, 96). With his millions of followers thirsty for visual feeds from their PM, Modi understood how to use, as Sardesai pointed out, 'his wardrobe as a power statement and for deft image-building' (Sardesai 2019, 65). These digital media favour the visual rather than the textual, which gives extra weight to Modi's wardrobe, hairstyle and beard, and demeanour.

It is indisputable that appearance carries a semiotic function and that it serves as a means of communication (Owyong 2009, 192). Historically, clothing matters have been particularly sensitive and powerful issues in India. The most prominent example is of Gandhi's khadi, which was turned into a powerful political symbol, a sign of anti-imperial struggle and of nationalist fervour, and which was used as an enormous exercise in mass mobilisation (see Chakrabarty 2001; Ramagundam 2018; Tarlo 1996). Tarlo argues that by 'adopting the loincloth he was able to communicate all his most important messages through the medium of dress' (1996, 62). What do Modi's clothes represent? While his previous style signalled a blend of tradition, modernity and efficiency, with his 'Modi kurta' and tailored Indian suits, we inquire into the messages carried in his guru attire.

What is at stake in Modi's politics of guru performance? What kinds of ends does he want to achieve? And what consequences might his politics of guru performance have in the short and long runs?

## Towards new modes of Hindutva politics

### Credibility in moments of crisis

From sifting through images of Modi and comparing them with newspaper reports from and about India, it is clear that Modi's beard reached its unruliest stages as the second wave of the pandemic in India was starting to peak at the end of May 2021. After weathering the first wave in a way that surprised many commentators, Modi boasted about India's dealing with the crisis, including during his speech at the online World Economic Forum in January 2021: 'In a country which is home to 18% of the world population, that country has saved humanity from a big disaster by containing corona effectively' (PM India 2021). Just a few months later, India was in the grip of a deadly second wave which spun out of control, with large numbers of people dying. Despite clear indications that a second wave was imminent, Modi and his government promoted two events which brought millions of people together, the April 2021 Kumbh Mela in Haridwar and the March–April elections in West Bengal. Both events were politically important for Modi, but they were disastrous for the containment of the pandemic.<sup>13</sup> The management of the pandemic in India was a severe failure that resulted in the collapse of the system; this led the political activist Arundhati Roy to speak of 'a crime against humanity' (A. Roy 2021). Alongside the COVID-19 crisis, the Modi government was dealing with at least two other large-scale crises which occupied the news cycle, namely the farmers' protests against the new Farm Bills, and military stand-offs on the border with China. The farmers' protests were a challenge, since it was harder to apply the BJP playbook of accusing its opponent of being anti-nationalists. The crisis on the border held the potential for humiliation, as China clearly had the upper hand. Media reports on these different crises, and particularly on the catastrophic development of the pandemic in India, abound. In the following we discuss a number of parallel and intertwined interpretations of Modi's guru image, and suggest some of our own. As it is too early to state things with confidence, what follows should be read as an attempt to chart different potential motivations for Modi's experimentation with the 'guru logic'.

At the height of this turmoil, against the backdrop of the above challenges, Modi was losing support. His approval rating fell from 66 per cent to 24 per cent (*The Wire* 2021), and hashtags such as #ModiMustResign or #ModiHaiToFailureHai were trending. During this unprecedented challenge to his authority, Modi chose to stage the image of a Hindu guru. The confluence of these different events invites the obvious question: Was Modi's guru image a way of transcending his failures in managing the different crises? Though it is possible to imagine a scenario in which Modi could have recovered his popularity without taking any action, it does not seem far-fetched to link his guru appearance to negative polls. Modi's transformation can be read as a way of circumventing responsibility for the disastrous management of the crises. As a guru he locates himself as the spiritual leader of the nation offering moral rather than material support. As a guru, he is not expected to take practical actions and solve problems, his duty is to soothe and to provide an assuring presence. Jaffrelot (2021b, 464) highlights the connection between guruhood and the dodging of political responsibility, stating: 'Charisma is above accountability, and Modi has grasped these dynamics.' As is well known, charisma is one of Max Weber's central sociological terms related to the legitimisation of authority. According to Weber, personalised charisma means 'a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he [sic] is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities' (1968, 241). More precisely, charisma does not mark a personal quality, but a successful claim to a quality, or, in Weber's words, 'recognition on the part of those subject to authority' (1968, 242).

Why is Modi's claim of guru-hood accepted and reinforced? Why is he endowed with charismatic authority when he enacts the Hindu guru? We hold that these dynamics are linked to the powerful presence of the image of the modern guru in post-colonial India. As discussed above, alongside the consolidation of India as a nation, gurus became nationally recognised figures, with high levels of credibility. By enacting the guru figure, Modi is exploiting the power of that image. As we argued above, what we are witnessing here is not a completely unexpected and abrupt transformation. The image of the ascetic guru has always been one thread in the larger 'Modi myth' (Kaul 2017). However, it has now, for a moment, superseded other aspects of the multifarious image that Modi promotes. Britta Ohm writes that the challenges of the pandemic 'magnified dominant characteristics of people as much as of leaderships around the world' (Ohm 2021, 502). While we agree with the gist of that statement, we also want to bring attention to Modi's agency in that process. Modi's

image of the guru is not a mere reaction to challenges. Rather, it is a conscious utilisation of them. The pandemic created a rupture in normal politics and Modi used the situation as a laboratory to explore a new kind of politics. We assume that this was partly a strategy to evade responsibility in a moment of severe crises. However, it also seems likely that Modi is following an even larger goal by enacting the god-man. Modi's guru appearance is closely intertwined with his determination to realise his political agenda of creating a Hindu state and of attaining unprecedented dominance in Indian politics and history.

### Hindutva at a crossroads

Seeing the Indian Prime Minister appear as a guru is particularly striking in the context of the strict division between electoral politics and the RSS that existed until very recently. The Sangh Parivar (family of the co-religionists), a term in use since the 1950s to refer to the expansive network of affiliated Hindutva organisations, is known for its order and its rigid division of labour (see [Jaffrelot 2021b](#), 17). At the core of the network sits the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh). It was founded in 1925 by K. B. Hedgewar as a Hindu revivalist movement with paramilitary overtones and a stringent anti-minority, anti-Muslim discourse. It focused on training young men to promote and defend Hindu values. In the decades following the founding of the organisation, its members branched out and established many sister organisations with separate constitutions and structures in order to reach and influence as many Hindus as possible and to counter other ideologies, such as communism. These organisations range from workers' and farmers' unions, India's largest student union (Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad) to the VHP, a coalition of Hindu organisations whose aim is to 'protect the Hindu Dharma' ([VHP 2022](#)). All of these unions became dominant players in their respective fields, with their own programmes, schemes and target groups (see [Jaffrelot 2005](#), 10). Initially, the ideology of the RSS was to influence society from below through education and mobilisation, which still holds true today.<sup>14</sup> However, after being banned, following Gandhi's murder by a former RSS member, the leaders decided that they needed political power as well in order to promote their cause. Therefore, from the 1950s onwards, the RSS established political parties, starting with the BJS (Bharatiya Jana Sangh, established in 1951), the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party, established in 1980) being its latest avatar. There has always been a dynamic division between the RSS and the BJP, whose fluctuations were dominated by political calculations. The idea was that the BJP was to focus on gaining



political power even at the cost of diluting Hindutva ideology, while the RSS was tasked with protecting this very ideology. After a period in which the BJP had to obscure its association with the RSS in order to appease its various coalition partners, following the BJP's electoral successes in 2014 and especially 2019, the relationship between the two organisations was more publicly acknowledged (on the relationship between the RSS and BJP, see [Jaffrelot 2012](#), 88–94; [Kanungo 2006](#)). Modi embodied the arrival of RSS ideology, with its Hindu supremacist fervour and aggressive anti-minority propaganda, in the mainstream of Indian politics. Modi's guru performance can be interpreted as marking a transition in the established order. When Modi, in his position as prime minister and leader of the BJP, orchestrates the Hindu guru, he is establishing a new configuration of the Sangh. As mentioned above, a dominant strategy of the Hindutva movement was to split into different groups in order to reach as diverse an audience as possible. Today, Hindutva is the dominant political force in India and no longer needs to water down its stated ideology. It seems likely that, at this stage, the movement is rethinking its strategy and experimenting with new possibilities. Modi's enactment of the Hindu guru could be read as marking a crossroads in the tactics of the Sangh. The figure of the Hindu guru as prime minister weaves together the distinct domains of the BJP and the RSS and creates new possibilities for extending and wielding power.

Following this line of thought, one could go a step further. What we see is not just the reorganisation of the Sangh Parivar, but an expression of Modi's larger political goal. Modi follows the conspicuous agenda of creating some version of a Hindu ethnocracy.<sup>15</sup> In Modi's ethnocracy the old structure of the Sangh Parivar is no longer needed. The 'old order' is only good for 'the old India', that is, a democratic India. Through his political actions, he is consolidating a Hindu public sphere and facilitating the marginalisation of minorities. India, which used to be a role model for democracy in the Global South, has transitioned first into a '*de facto* ethnic democracy' since Modi's election to power in 2014, and lately, with a number of drastic changes and amendments in the law and constitution, into a '*de jure* ethnic democracy' ([Jaffrelot 2021b](#), 128–30).

As discussed above, the figure of the Hindu guru helps Modi to promote this political goal. To deliver his message and to win people's (that is, Hindus') support for his cause, Modi has to speak a language that is understood nationwide. There is no parallel figure in India which is as widely understood and recognised as that of the Hindu god-man. In other words, for the Hindu collective identity the figure of the guru elicits the most identification. People from disparate regions and classes understand

the language of the Hindu guru, a language of which the grammar has come to centre on a Hindu supremacist ideology, a zeal to revive ancient Hindu traditions and return to an untarnished past, and a determination to heal the wounds of Muslim influence and colonialism. By orchestrating the Hindu guru, Modi is effectively tapping into this semiotic register. When the Prime Minister appears as a Hindu guru, he does not appear as a representative of Indian citizens but as a representative of Hindus only. The guru garb marks him as a leader of Hindus, implicitly unifying them against all non-Hindus. To put it bluntly, Modi's guru look fosters his agenda of establishing a Hindu ethnocracy, without naming it explicitly. Modi's self-fashioning as the Hindu guru is a conscious aesthetic effort of immense significance for the contours of democracy or ethnocracy in India. Modi's makeover during the pandemic needs to be linked with his ambitions to radically alter Indian democracy.

## Conclusion

Modi's aesthetic transformation has the potential to be of immense significance. In spring 2020, at a moment when the Prime Minister was faced with an array of severe crises, he took on the image of the Hindu guru. His guru makeover was achieved by blending a marked change in his sartorial style and the length and cut of his beard and hair. One and a half years later, Modi suspended the carefully crafted guru look. In September 2021, when Modi set out on his first trip abroad since the pandemic, he presented himself to the nation and the world with a trimmed beard and cut hair. He still looked different from the pre-COVID Modi, as his beard was noticeably longer. However, at this point he shed the guru image and presented himself as a man who is prepared for worldly affairs (Sharma 2021). It is too early to understand what this latest makeover indicates. Did the period of Modi's guru-hood come to an end, or did he just put the experiment on hold? Will Modi now create a middle ground in which he presents himself as a guru and as an international power broker, depending on his audience?

Having closely examined Modi's performance of the Hindu guru, we have shown how he played with a well-established and powerful imagery of the Hindu guru. Through adopting the guru logic, he introduced a novel mode of the guru politician. In our discussion of Modi's striking shape shifting, we put particular emphasis on the intersection of Hindu gurus and the political economy of Hindutva, a pivotal issue in the history of the Indian nation-state. We have examined possible motivations for the

image makeover and considered the short- and long-term consequences that Modi's guru-esque appearance might have for himself, but also for the future of India and particularly of Indian democracy. We have interpreted Modi's makeover as a way of circumventing responsibility for the disastrous management of the pandemic and failures with regard to other severe crises. Furthermore, we have shown how Modi's display of Hindu guru-hood is shaking up or even undermining the established division of labour in the Sangh Parivar. This has led us to suggest that Modi's transformation should be read as a deliberate way of espousing and advancing his agenda of building the foundation for an ethnocratic Hindu nation-state.

There is another element that needs to be taken into consideration when unpacking Modi's display of guru aesthetic, and that we have, so far, left out. Modi's actions can also be read as an expression of 'Moditva' (Kanungo and Farooqui 2008). That is, it is unclear whether Modi's experiments with the symbols of guru-hood have to do with a vision of Hindutva or with an attempt to gain as much personal power as possible. Perhaps rather than reorganising the Sangh Parivar, Modi is destabilising it in order to create a new order which is about Modi himself. Perhaps Modi's embodiment of the guru is not only about Hindutva ideology. Rather, he is doing this because the figure of the guru promises absolute power to himself. This is in line with contemporary strongman leaders such as Trump, Bolsonaro, Duterte and others whose emphasis is often more on spectacle than on promoting a specific coherent ideology. Being the centre of attention becomes the ideology, much as commodification of the self is a marker of our neoliberal age. An example of Modi's taking centre stage and deliberately sidelining the RSS hierarchy occurred in August 2020, when he did not invite prominent Hindutva leaders, who had been instrumental in the Ramjanmabhoomi movement, to the laying of the cornerstone for the new Ram temple in Ayodhya. Traditionally the RSS and the Sangh promoted loyalty to the cause and the organisation, and were suspicious of charismatic individuals. This is where Modi seems to be breaking free. Through his guru enactment he is building the foundation for this new type of political structure, namely, strongman leadership. Modi's Hindutva, or Moditva if you like, includes leader worship, majoritarianism, muscular Hinduism and grandiose building projects. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Modi's style of leadership has created an atmosphere of fear among those who dare oppose him.

Modi's performance as the Hindu guru testifies to his ability to use a crisis as an opportunity to experiment and further his agenda. While part of his sharp change in appearance was 'just' an immediate response

to the multiple challenges he faced, we argue that his experiment has gone further and that he has skilfully used the extraordinary situation as a laboratory for future plans. Modi's experimentation with the figure of the Hindu guru has revealed that his future political path might include a mixture of religious symbolism that would be novel for an Indian prime minister, and that poses a real threat to religious minorities. Moreover, Modi's taking on the figure of the guru might signal a further shift towards weakening the secular framework of the state and government. The atmosphere in India today for minorities and dissenters is quite grim. Modi remains silent when Hindu leaders call for genocide of Muslims, but posts numerous comments about other issues on his social media feeds. Modi's guru look allows him to implicitly support more extreme strains of Hindutva while giving him space for plausible denial should things get out of hand. He signals Hindutva but can very rarely be directly quoted on it. This is sufficient for his followers and allows him to continue to participate on the world stage without being directly held responsible for the atmosphere of fear that pervades India under his rule.

## Notes

- 1 An incident that compellingly illustrates Modi's ability to stage image makeovers took place in the run-up to the parliamentary elections in 2014 and his early period in office. Modi used a range of communication strategies to rebrand his image as a totalitarian leader, which haunted him from his decade as Chief Minister of Gujarat and, moreover, his image as a CM who instigated and endorsed a pogrom against the Muslim minority in 2002.
- 2 Quotation translated from the Bengali original by *The Economic Times*.
- 3 Similarly, Nandy identifies Aurobindo as 'India's first modern guru' (Nandy 2010, 97), a bold statement that he does not elaborate or explain.
- 4 For a comparison between Gandhi and Modi see Basu 2020; for a comparison between Gandhi and current Hindu gurus in Gujarat see Mehta 2017.
- 5 When Modi had received Barack Obama as an official state guest at the Republic Day celebrations in 2015, he was wearing a suit with small golden letters spelling out his name repeatedly in the pinstripes. It was a highly controversial moment. Modi's move to wear a monogrammed suit at a US president's visit was interpreted by many as a narcissistic step too far and an expression of Modi's megalomaniac character.
- 6 In 2016, Baba Ramdev received a lot of media attention (#TalibaniRamdev), after publicly stating that people who refuse to say the Hindu patriotic slogan 'Bharat Mata Ki Jai' (Hail to Mother India) should be beheaded (*The Indian Express* 2016).
- 7 The official goal of the Swachh Bharat Mission is to end open defecation and to implement a country-wide solid waste management (Swachh Bharat Mission 2021).
- 8 Another example of a god-man based in south India who is committed to Hindu nationalist politics is Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, who spearheads the Art of Living Foundation (on the Art of Living Foundation see Jacobs 2015; Tøllefsen 2011).
- 9 The relationship between political and religious leaders in India, and particularly the role of religious experts in politics, is a subject often discussed among scholars of the history of religion on the Indian subcontinent (see for example Appadurai 1981; Dirks 1987; Dumont 1980; Gold 1987; Sears 2014).
- 10 On the promotion of Hindu gurus by the VHP and the Hindu gurus as the main supporters of the organisation, see Jaffrelot (2001). For a short description of the development of the

- Sangh–guru alliance, see Kanungo (2019, 121–2). Lucia also provides a summary of the conjunction of Hindu gurus and Hindu nationalism (2020, 420–3). For a discussion of the relationship between Hindu gurus and political authorities, with a focus on the RSS as the Raj guru of the ruling party, see Jaffrelot (2012).
- 11 Another example is Baba Ramdev, who founded the Bharat Swabhiman Trust with decidedly political goals (Gupta and Copeman 2019).
  - 12 For an analysis of Modi's use of his addresses to the nation through *Mann Ki Baat*, see Jaffrelot 2021b, 113–15; Sharma and Dubey 2021.
  - 13 The Kumbh Mela was a symbol of resurgent Hinduism and an occasion for consolidating the image of Modi as promoting Hindu tradition in the face of modern scientific interference. The elections in West Bengal were crucial for the BJP's plan of increasing their power, and the polls showed that they had a chance to win in West Bengal for the first time in history. In the end, the BJP lost the election and the Trinamool Congress stayed in power.
  - 14 In this regard, Anderson and Longkumer describe the Hindutva organisations as 'committed to root-and-branch societal transformation – in the form of a so-called "Hindu Renaissance" – and to this end have made inroads into education, development, the environment, industry, culture, and almost every other aspect of public life' (Anderson and Longkumer 2018, 372).
  - 15 The term ethnocracy was popularised by the Israeli sociologist Oren Yiftachel. Yiftachel uses the term to describe 'a specific expression of nationalism that exists in contested territories where a dominant ethnos gains political control and uses the state apparatus to ethnicize the territory and society in question' (Yiftachel 2000, 730). For work that applies the concept to the Indian context, see especially Adeney 2021; Jaffrelot 2021a; I. Roy 2021; S. Sen 2015.

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