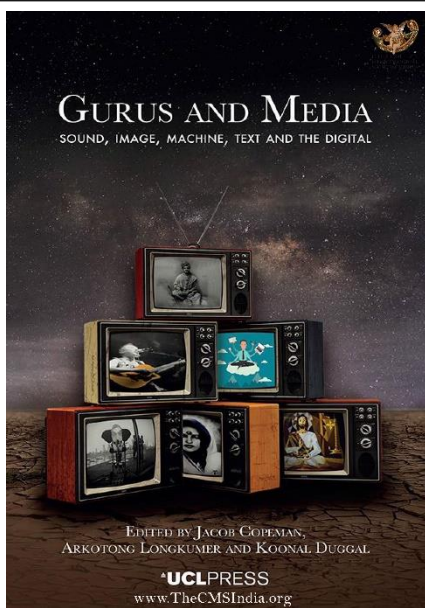


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1

The sonic guru: Rewben Mashangva, folk, roots and the blues

Arkotong Longkumer

I first discovered guru Rewben Mashangva through a video link on WhatsApp. It read *Songlines: An exploration of blues notes in folk music across India*. The roll of the camera shows the familiar, resounding geography of Northeast India. I hear the drone of the blues guitar.

‘This is folk. The blues also same thing. For example, this is pure folk, our folk.’ The camera pans across a room. A guitar slide creates a gliding effect (or a glissando) resembling the human voice. The deep vibratos of the blues and slight changes to the voicing texture the singing. An impromptu lyric of the film director accompanies the song, ‘Oh, Vasudha, angel of my eyes, I love you ...’ The music ends. The camera focuses on guru Rewben Mashangva: ‘Now, the Western people say, the blues is coming originally from America, and not from Africa. Actually, the blues is started by black man, but started from America.’ A black-and-white scene shifts to the American South, with Leadbelly singing a traditional cotton pickin’ song. Guru then makes the point that the Naga people sang the blues even before American independence, even before the African slaves went to America. To emphasise this, he starts singing a traditional Tangkhul Naga work song, *hopi p*, with his son Saka Mashangva providing the refrain: *hopi p (guru), le ho le (Saka) ...*¹

He tells me that blues and folk are different terms in the English language but in the Tangkhul language there is no difference: both blues and folk are ‘haua’. This is perhaps not the place to tease out the fine-grained distinction between blues and folk,² but guru’s emphasis is on the fact that the oral tradition of singing the blues based on ‘work songs’ and

2

'Non-human gurus': yoga dolls, online avatars and meaningful narratives

Patrick S. D. McCartney and Diego Lourenço

Introduction

The etymology of 'guru' appears to stretch back to the Proto-Indo-European root **gwere-*₁. 'Guru' has come to mean that someone can have a large presence through a sense of 'heaviness'. This signifies the *gravitas* of a charismatic authority figure such as a guru, who is considered an expert teacher capable of transmitting knowledge to disciples. Following on from this is the concept of preserving and perpetuating the transmission of knowledge through an intergenerational tradition (*paramparā*). However, as is the focus of this chapter, for this process to work a human guru might not always be required. Objects such as books have been regarded as gurus or forms of representation of a particular tradition's line. The best example of this is Sikhism's sacred book, the Guru Granth Sahib, which is legally considered to be a 'living guru' whose desecration carries lengthy prison terms (see [Myrvold 2010](#)). Likewise, contemporary yoga spread around the world initially through books and pamphlets even when such texts were not assigned to a known tradition or guru. The obvious function of the written word in prescribing and translating experience implies that guruship can occur so long as the act of reading can enact a sense of connection or discipleship in the reader. Indeed, that was the case in many countries, some which were at the centre of contemporary yoga developments, such as the UK ([Newcombe 2019](#)), and others at the periphery, such as Brazil ([Lourenço 2021](#)). Still, adding to the 'contemporary guru field' ([Lucia 2022](#)), we envision the guru

3

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.

4

'Immortal Gurus of *Bhārata*': the social biography of a contemporary image

Raphaël Voix

Over the last 20 years or so in India, it has not been unusual to come across a particular type of religious image that appears to borrow from the theological inclusiveness of caste Hinduism while referring to sectarian saintly figures. In these images the gurus placed side by side represent different sectarian affiliations, although all belong to religious communities originating on the South Asian continent. They look like 'class photographs' of ascetics. The images, more prevalent in north India and very likely originating in Bengal, are most often found in places of worship dedicated to a saint, even though they are not themselves objects of worship and no ritual seems to be associated with them. What then is their function? What exactly do they represent? What is the logic behind the choice of characters represented?

In order to answer these questions, I shall start with a study of the corpus of the images and give a broad outline of the shared characteristics that establish this corpus as a particular 'type'. Next, I shall set up a social biography (Appadurai 1986) of one of these images, analysing its genesis and the variations it presents. According to the logic I will identify, I will, in my final section, consider the relationship with the other that these figures give rise to. I shall endeavour especially to explain the paradox whereby these sectarian figures, generally worshipped in an exclusive manner, are gathered together here to bring about a modality peculiar to Hindu pluralism, which I shall call 'egalitarian pluralism'. The aim in this study will be, on the one hand, to give an account of a singular relationship to otherness in which the habitual theological and regional boundaries

5

Languages of longing: Indian gurus, Western disciples, and practices of letter writing

Somak Biswas

This chapter will look at the role of letters as a medium for constituting discipleship. I examine three Indian guru figures – the Hindu monk Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), the poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), the nationalist leader Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) – and their relationships with close Western disciples. Located firmly in a time of high British imperialism, this chapter charts the important work letters did in moulding sympathetic Western men and women into intimate disciples serving a range of Indian causes.

The cast of Western disciples gathered around these guru figures came from a variety of backgrounds. C. F. Andrews and William Pearson were Christian missionaries (Anglican and Baptist respectively), Margaret Noble, Sara Bull and Josephine MacLeod were involved in various heterodox initiatives (linked to Hindu eclecticism), Madeleine Slade was the daughter of a British Admiral. Many of them, such as Sister Nivedita (Margaret Noble), C. F. Andrews and Mira Behn (Madeleine Slade), came to occupy major roles in Indian cultural and political nationalism. Ashram experiments, especially Shantiniketan and Sabarmati (Belur Math less so, given its male monastic character), became aspirational communities that inspired their Indophilia, defined broadly as romanticised engagements around Hindu forms of India. Western followers' profound spiritual disquiet was rooted in the mechanisation of life produced by the onset of industrial modernity and violence in the West; gurus and ashrams constituted part of a larger 'seeking'. All of them were attracted to forms of immanent spirituality that inhered in the figures of Vivekananda, Gandhi and Tagore.

6

***Śabda-guru*: conflicts of guruship, mediational phenomenology and *Śabda*-philosophy in Sikhism**

Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair

Introduction

Sikhism is often referred to as a ‘Guru’ tradition par excellence, and not surprisingly, because it had 10 living, or personal, Gurus as well as an authoritative scripture called the Guru Granth Sahib. Moreover, the term ‘Guru’ is quite possibly the most prevalent in the Sikh conceptual lexicon, giving rise to such terms as *gurmat* (the logic or philosophy of the Guru), *gurprśād* (by the Guru’s grace), *gurbāṇī* (the utterance of the Guru), *gurdarśan* (the Guru’s vision), to name but a few. One might therefore conclude that Sikhism is just like any other of the many Indian guru traditions. Doesn’t the prevalence of personal gurus within the wider Sikh Panth (community), in the form of Baba-sects, *dera*-Babas, Sants¹ and related sectarian figures, attest to the long-held view, reflected by the scholar of Sikhism W. Owen Cole, that it is to ‘that Indian religious tradition that we must turn in our attempt to understand the major distinct concept of Sikhism, that of guruship’ (Cole 1982, 1)? Indeed, as Cole states, although ‘India has seen the emergence of many guru cults in its long history’ and although ‘[m]any have disappeared soon after the death of the preceptor’, so that the ‘guru becomes lost to memory save for a samadhi, a tomb or memorial shrine’, evidently this is not the case for Sikhism, which ‘may be regarded as a gurucult which has persisted and in doing so made a distinctive contribution to the concept of guru in the Indian religious tradition’ (Cole 1982, 2).

Although Cole was not incorrect to emphasise the ‘distinctive contribution to the concept of guru’, his categorisation of Sikhism as a

7

Hacking God: Ganesh Yourself, an incarnation experiment in human divine circuitry

Emmanuel Grimaud

Bappa 1.0 was launched in Mumbai during the Ganapati festival in 2014 and advertised, with a hint of exaggeration, as ‘the first ever robot of a god’. It was in fact conceived by the artist Zaven Paré and myself for an ‘incarnation experiment’ named Ganesh Yourself.¹ With its uncanny resemblance to the god Ganesh, the interface allowed anyone to put themselves in God’s shoes and experience this impossible perspective framed as a conversation with another. Operated by a controller (or ‘embodier’) tasked with doing ‘God’s voice’, with a webcam displaying their face in the robot by internal back projection, the tele-operated machine presented an opportunity for a rather more interactive dialogue than usual encounters with silent idols. To our considerable surprise, Bappa was quickly adopted, without major issues but not in the way we expected. Hindu priests incorporated it into their rituals as a prop for broadcasting mantras. Astrologers used it for their consultations, seeing in such an interface the potential for a different type of dialogue with clients. Political activists, from environmentalists to gays and feminists, harnessed the machine to spread reformist messages, recognising that an interface that looked like a god was a good way to get oneself heard. What if the Ganesh Yourself incarnation game was a shortcut to becoming a guru, amplifying one’s own aura and making disciples? It was a risk, but the following account will show that it was not so simple. What if all gurus’ performances were actually incarnation experiments unaware of their possibilities of circuitry? Originally conceived as a small experiment in divine (media) performance, Ganesh Yourself was bound to fail.

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Flooding the Web: absence-presence and the media strategies of Nithyananda's digital empire

Amanda Lucia

In 2013, just before a busy pedestrian bridge at the Kumbh Mela¹ in Prayagraj, India, a sari-clad *videśī* (foreign[er]) *brahmacāriṇī* (renunciate aspirant) invited me into her guru Swami Nithyananda's camp. The camp exterior was the towering façade of the famed Meenakshi temple of Madurai, made from thin decoratively painted plywood suspended on bamboo scaffolding. Inside at the centre was a golden *siṅhāsan* (altar throne), upon which a richly adorned golden figure of Shiva was seated with his trident, *ḍamaru* (drum), diamond earrings and silk turban, replete with a bejewelled golden Parvati perched delicately on his lap. To the right was a life-sized wax statue of the guru, Swami Nithyananda. He was similarly turbaned and wore a *rudrakṣa mālā* (prayer necklace), bracelets and armbands, and diamond bling; all three wore rich, high-quality flower *mālās* (garlands). The life-sized wax figurine of Nithyananda sat in lotus position, cross-legged on a bed of ochre brocaded silk with his right hand raised in the *abhayamudrā* ('fear not' hand gesture).

Several days earlier, in a secret ceremony, the Mahanirvani Akhara (a sect of Daśnami *saṃnyāsis*, Shaivite world-renouncing ascetics) had appointed Swami Nithyananda as a *Māhāmaṇḍaleśwar*, a high-ranking title of religious leadership. That year, by chance I had befriended several *sādhus* (ascetics) of the sect, and from them I learned that several of them were honoured that Nithyananda had been given such a prestigious title in their *akhāra* (ascetic sect), and one showed me pictures of him on his mobile phone, proud of his proximity to the famed guru. But soon controversy began to erupt. The president of the Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad (ABAP, the apex body of the 13 Akhāras) decried that 'he

When God dies: multi-mediation, the elsewhere and crypto-futurity in a global guru movement

Tulasi Srinivas

The end is the beginning

It was not the end that Shri Sathya Sai Baba, global guru and spiritual leader of several million followers, had envisaged for himself. He had repeatedly prophesied that he would 'leave his body' at the ripe old age of 96 and remain healthy until then (Babb 1986). But on 24 April 2011, Easter Sunday morning, the BBC reported, at the top of the news hour, that Sathya Sai Baba had died at 7.40 a.m. in the super-specialty hospital named after him in his home town of Puttaparthi, in rural south India, at the age of 84. The news flashed through his network of followers spread across the globe,¹ carried as banner headlines by his own media empire of Sai Television and Sai Radio, and through to other Indian and global news organisations.

This was the beginning of a media crush in Puttaparthi, as national and international television crews and newspaper reporters rushed to this small provincial town in south India to cover the story of the guru's illness and death. As journalist Adnan Adibi of Reuters noted, mourners were allowed to 'pay their last respects' to a 'man revered as a living god', following which the funeral and interment took place at the Sai ashram.²

As hundreds of thousands of mourners made their way to the ashram, Sai Baba's body was placed in an air-conditioned crystal coffin, ordered at great expense by the Sai Trust from the nearby city of Bangalore, to cool the guru's body in the searing heat of the south Indian plains. Indian television stations broadcast (in real time) footage of the

Envisioning silence: Ramana Maharshi and the rise of Advaitic photography

Yagna Nag Chowdhuri

Many stories of meetings with and accidentally encountering the guru or master are found in the memoirs written by seekers. Gurus emerge from glimpses of meeting in dreams and in moments of recognition, while the seekers are looking into the guru's eyes or at a photograph. Gurus and masters appear through the power of their voice, vision or action. In this chapter, I analyse the making and remaking of such a figure, namely Ramana Maharshi, within a complex matrix of recognition and encounter through texts and media. I read his thought and practice through the concept of the 'figure', to highlight the processes by which he came into being and is continually remade. I argue that he drew upon older philosophies of self-transformation and refashioned these through media technologies, such as photography, thus giving rise to new discourses and practices that were further shaped by transnational encounters between gurus and disciples. Out of these discourses, practices and encounters, Ramana Maharshi emerged as a 'figure'.¹ I propose that theorising the figure is a broad mode of analysis, which enables the study of different relationalities, discourses, media and practices, and of the circulation of ideas. Hence, I contend that this mode of analysis can be applied to unpack varied gurus and their worlds. I further assert that the theory of the figure emerges from a matrix of relationalities, and therefore does not have a singular place of origin.

11

'Christ the guru': artistic representations of Jesus Christ in south India and their mediated notions of guru-ness

E. Dawson Varughese

It was in a hotel lobby in Munnar, Kerala, south India in late 2016 that I spotted the image of Christ as guru; he seemed to be watching over me, a framed image, hanging high above the reception desk. Positioned alone and located centrally in a panel of wooden wall cladding, the radiant and luminous white of his robes emanated from the otherwise dark surface surrounding him. This moment of 'seeing' was powerful for me, not having experienced such an intimate moment with a visual rendition of Christ portrayed as a guru in such a 'secular' space before. I experienced the guru-ness through his seated, cross-legged posture and his lightly closed eyes, and in his symbolic hand gesture (*mudra*). The owner of the Munnar hotel is a friend and so I was able to find out about the image, which I came to learn is entitled *Christ the Guru*. Eventually, I purchased an A1-sized print of it through the Christian Musicological Society of India based in Kochi, Kerala,¹ where this particular image has been adopted – practically, if not formally.² The appellation of *Christ the Guru* for this piece came from Dr Palackal, the founding member of the society.³ The circulation of images of Jesus Christ is common in south India – on paper, as framed prints and in other ways – and Visvanathan, in her book *The Christians of Kerala* (2010), talks of the importance of visual representation of Christ in Keralite homes when she writes:

A Christian house can be recognized by the 'holy' pictures on the walls. ... Pictures of Mary with the infant Christ are also frequently

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The total guru: film star guruship in the time of Hindutva

Jacob Copeman and Koonal Duggal

On 25 January 2017, at the Dera Sacha Sauda (DSS) headquarters in Sirsa, Haryana, the guru made his grand entrance before an audience of tens of thousands of devotees. It was an unusual sight, even in a devotional context where the unusual had become usual, to see him arrive on the stage astride an army tank, wearing black goggles and attire, gold embellishments and jewellery. As he sat atop the tank and saluted his devotee audience, flashes of colourful spotlights added to the dramatic effect. The guru was received with dancing, cheering and thunderous applause. Many in the crowd recorded the moment on their mobile phone cameras. High-volume synthesizers and drumbeats from the live orchestra provided the soundtrack as the guru descended from the tank and walked towards his cheering devotees, saluting and waving at them. If the scene was reminiscent of the dramatic entry of a hero in Bollywood films, it also recalled the grand entries of pop stars such as Michael Jackson in their live concerts. These are more than analogies, for by then the DSS guru had himself become a pop and film star, as well as having begun to perform a number of other roles not normally associated with spiritual guruship. Significantly, it was not only his roles that were changing. As his guruship unfolded over time, the roles of bhakt (devotee), spectator and fan became progressively folded together. If the movement's emphasis on the content of its teachings and practices appeared to decrease over this time, its 'exorbitant magnitude'¹ and focus on devotional spectacle centred on the guru starkly intensified. The DSS had developed into what we call a 'devotion of attractions'. If such techniques for the production of awe and surprise as the grand entrance of the guru had been integrated from Bollywood films and live rock and pop concerts, these were roles that he had also already begun to perform. Indeed, given that the DSS

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Doing seeing: televised yoga, consumption and religious nationalism in neoliberal India

Srirupa Bhattacharya

Some say that the idea of holding yoga lessons on television was not Baba Ramdev's own. It came to him in 2002 from a top executive of Aastha (meaning 'faith'), a religious television channel in India, and even though they could not convince the Chief Executive Officer of the company, the idea never left Baba Ramdev (see for example [Pathak-Narain 2017](#), 55–6¹). What happened after that is widely reported: Baba Ramdev took this idea to Sanskar (which means 'values'), a rival religious television channel, and successfully bargained for a 20-minute morning slot in 2003. The programme was so popular that within months television channels were fighting for the yoga guru to appear in their programmes. A long way from these boardroom negotiations and tussles, I had finished school and started going to college in Calcutta. My father had suffered a stroke and was hospitalised for a couple of days. When he came home, he tried to give up smoking, and began to wake up at 6.30 a.m. to watch Baba Ramdev's show. I was baffled that a person who I had never seen entering a temple, performing a religious ritual, praying, or practising yoga, would now *religiously* watch a saffron-clad and bearded sannyasi every day. Walking round a predominantly CPM-para (Communist Party of India (Marxist) neighbourhood, or a neighbourhood that mostly votes for the Left), I was surprised to hear the sound of spiritual healing coming out of television sets in several *secular* homes, especially in the morning. After a few months my father went back to smoking and waking up at 8.00 a.m., and I forgot about Baba Ramdev's meteoric rise to fame and wealth through teaching yoga on television, till the time came for me to write an initial proposal for my MPhil in 2008.



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