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हेतवे जगतामेव संसाराणवसेतवे। प्रभवे सर्वविद्यानां शम्भवे गुरवे नमः॥३३॥

Hetave jagatāmeva saṁsārāṇavasetave Prabhave sarvavidyānāṁ śambhave gurave namah || 33 ||

The Guru is the only cause, the ultimate source and the bridge that carries you across this world. Bow to the one with all knowledge. || 33 ||

Guru Gita, Skanda Purana¹

'GURU' DEVOTION IN INDIA SOCIO-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES AND CURRENT TRENDS

To know and understand India one has to travel far in time and space...

(Nehru, 1946/1985, p. 200)

Abstract

Though the academic study of religion is considered nascent in India, eminent scholars speak of Hindu restoration and the evolution of a guru. In a highly dynamic and pluralistic India, various sociological perspectives stand valid even today, for a better understanding into the spurt of the new movements – religious, spiritual and charismatic. These offer several insights into the evolution of the 'guru phenomenon' in the country. We have come a long way from the traditional guru to the contemporary godman (godwoman). The 'Guru' in India has today entered the realm of religion. Despite having access to a wide pantheon of divine entities, what makes a people of a nation in current civilized and better literate times, cut across all barriers of caste and religion (also class) and surren-

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¹ Guru Gita, Skanda Purana, Verse 33, short version, Velthuis transliteration by Swami Nirmalananda ("Swami mantras", n.d.).

der one's all to that one ultimate authority called a 'guru'? What makes him 'god'? This paper attempts to comprehend, appreciate and study the evolution and progression of the 'guru' tradition in India - with an understanding of some sociological perspectives, the need for a 'Guru', role in Indian society, related psychoanalysis, and finally current trends. As we do so, this would only be the beginning of a journey in discovering the numerous traditions and movements that come to be associated with this phenomenon, each enshrined with its own trends, plentiful stories and abundant miracles – taking it to a new level, altogether.

Key words: Guru; Guru in India; new movements in India; Guru-shishya tradition; Charismatic Authority; Personality cults

ZJAWISKO GURU W INDIACH. PERSPEKTYWY SPOŁECZNO-KULTUROWE I AKTUALNE KIERUNKI

Streszczenie

Chociaż akademickie studia nad religią nadal postrzegane są w Indiach jako nowość, to wybitni uczeni mówią o hinduskim odnowieniu i ewolucji „guru”. W dynamicznych i pluralistycznych Indiach wciąż pojawiają się różnorodne koncepcje socjologiczne mające pomóc w lepszym zrozumieniu wzrostu liczby nowych ruchów religijnych, duchowych i charyzmatycznych. Odnoszą się one do wielu spostrzeżeń dotyczących ewolucji „zjawiska guru” w Indiach. Albowiem przebyliśmy długą drogę od tradycyjnego pojmowania guru do współczesnego rozumienia „boga-mężczyzny” („boga-kobiety”). Obecnie „guru” w Indiach jest częścią religii. Co jednak sprawia, że pomimo dostępu do szerokiego panteonu boskich istot ludzie danego narodu w obecnych cywilizowanych i lepiej wykształconych czasach, we wszystkich kastach i religiach (także klasach) poddają się najwyższej władzy nazywanej „guru”? Co umożliwi stanie się „bogiem”? W niniejszym artykule podjęto próbę – opierając się na wybranych koncepcjach socjologicznych, psychoanalizie, a także aktualnych trendach – zrozumienia, poznania i zbadania ewolucji i rozwoju tradycji „guru” w Indiach i jego roli w społeczeństwie indyjskim. Jednakże jest to dopiero początek podróży w odkrywaniu licznych tradycji i ruchów związanych z tym zjawiskiem, gdyż każde z nich zawiera własne nurty, bogactwo opowieści i obfitość cudów – wznoszą je na całkowicie nowy poziom.

Słowa kluczowe: Guru; Guru w Indiach; nowe ruchy w Indiach; tradycja guru-shishya; charyzmatyczna osobowość; kult osobistości

Known for its multiculturalism and religious pluralism, India is a celebration of diversities – ranging from its culture and languages to its religions and ethnicity. India's diversities can also be seen in the country's people, their art, customs, habits, traits and differing philosophies. In all this multiplicity, the nation and its culture is known to be united in its disparity, bound together by the fusion of various institutions, festivals and cuisine.

In India, religion is at the core of peoples daily lives and routine while also exercising its influence in matters of politics. It is an intriguing area of study for scholars. 'Indic religions have an enviable history of living traditions that span over millennia. India has vastly

accommodated different religious theologies and practices, and despite its multiculturalism and religious diversity is difficult to match anywhere in the world, it is a well-functioning secular democracy' (Sardella & Sain, 2013, p. 1).

Recently, a reputed newspaper reported that, "according to figures of the religion census of 2011, yet to be officially released, Hindus comprised 78.35 per cent of the total population of 121.05 crore as compared to 80.45 per cent of the total population in 2001" (Ghosh & Singh, 2015). While media reports show a dip in the population of Hindus during this decade, the fact is that it continues to be the single largest majority in the country – holding a central role in the nation's identity. Within Hinduism, there are multiple traditions (as per deities) and philosophies that are followed – for instance *Vaishnavism*, *Shaivism*, *Shaktism*, *Smartism*, other schools of thought like *Vedanta*, *Samkhya*, *Advaita*, and also its age-old oral, tribal and folk traditions. Ancient scriptures have had a continuous and pervasive influence for thousands of years on the traditions and mores of civilizations. Vedas, Upanishads, epics like Ramayana & Mahabharata and the Bhagwad Gita and Puranas celebrate the spirit of enquiry to delve within for the search for the 'ultimate truth'. Commenting on these scriptures, Jawaharlal Nehru in his book *The Discovery of India* rightly comments, "dating back to a remote antiquity, they are still a living force in the life of the Indian people" (Nehru, 1946/1985, p. 99). The unity of Hinduism is the unity of a continuously changing life. Religion for the Hindu is experience or attitude of mind (Radhakrishnan, 1975, p. 63).

The other major religions that co-exist here are Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism and Zoroastrianism, among others. Each faith is further divided into its various subsets. But, in the era of globalisation and popular media gaining centre stage, India stands as a heterogeneous society in which 'urbanisation', 'secularisation' and 'modernisation' have become more zeitgeist of these times.

Historically too, India has endured its culture and religious beliefs through the many invasions that the country has witnessed; even though the advent of British rule is known to have brought about multiple and radical influences—politically, economically and culturally. S. Abid Hussain, in the introduction to his book—*The National Culture of India* writes, "Culture is a sense of ultimate values possessed by a particular society as expressed in its collective institutions, by its individual members in their dispositions, feelings, attitudes and manners as well as in significant forms which they give to material objects" (Husain, 1978, p. xxiv). Composite culture (*made up of various parts*) he adds, has been the mainstay of our society for ages. "Many external influences have also shaped our society. They have come in the form of trade, commerce, conquests, religion, culture, etc. and the various processes involved are rather intricate." Over a period of time, this has made distinctions between religion and philosophy very difficult in the Indian tradition.

'GURU' IN INDIA: SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

But then India is a country of more than a billion people and tens of thousands of gurus.

(Biswas, 2014)

While helping to better understand social experiences, institutions and practices, religion also serves to explain a wide range of social attitudes and behavior. Research in India

emphasized on Indological approach, study of social and cultural life utilizing literature in sociological studies with a profound knowledge of Sanskrit literature, epics and poetry. "However, the academic study of religion is not yet fully developed in South Asia and the growth of the sociology of religion and religious studies presents a number of challenges. The field of religious studies in India somewhat has suffered from the fact that it is a sensitive territory due to threats of communalism and religious conflicts, that undermine the very fibre of any modern secular state" (Sardella & Sain, 2013, p. 3). In India, religion occupies a significant place in its culture, politics, and history.

Describing Hinduism in practice in urban India today, Nancy Falk writes that there is a "massive Hindu revival in today's India." She classifies this revival into two broad categories: the "cluster of movements promoting Hindu nationalist sentiments," and the "spate of new 'spiritual' movements" emphasizing self-transformation, service to others and the need to work for the good of all. "Scholars of modern Hindu movements and visual culture have paid serious attention to the former category, but the latter has received far less attention" (McLain, 2011)/

The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism (Weber, 1958), by Max Weber (1864–1920), originally in German (Weber, 1916/1923), commented on the structure of the Indian Caste System and its orthodox doctrines. (comprising of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras – who were priests, warriors, merchants and labourers respectively) (Weber analyses the high stature of Brahmins and the Hindu restoration and the evolution of a guru (Weber, 1958). "Weber stressed that popularization of the Brahmin teachers and gurus brought an essential change: it allowed Hinduism to extend its influence" (Kalberg, 2012).

A pioneer social anthropologist, Mysore Narasimhachar Srinivas (1916-1999), introduced the study of one's own society to Indian anthropologists based on first-hand fieldwork. He has conducted extensive research on the concept of 'social change' in India, 'dominant caste' and 'sanskritization'. ("Prof. MN Srinivas", n.d). According to him, "Sanskritization is a particular form of social change found in India. It denotes the process by which castes placed lower in the caste hierarchy seek upward mobility by emulating the rituals and practices of the upper or dominant castes." In a book he edited on the caste system in India: *Caste: Its 20th century Avatar* (Srinivas, 1996), one of his long-standing collaborators talks about a "strong tendency among members of the middle class to seek the help of gurus and godmen who they believe have supernatural powers to solve their practical problems in life" (Panini, 1996, p. 54).

Damodar Dharmananda Kosambi's (1907-1966) ground-breaking works and methods with reference to religion in ancient India initiated the integration of various branches of study and its comparative techniques. Towards the beginning of the introduction in his *Myth & Reality: Studies in the Formation of Indian culture, A collection of essays on religion* (Kosambi, 1962), he wrote: "One of the main problems for consideration is: Why is a fusion of cults sometimes possible and why do cults stubbornly refuse to merge on other occasions?" (Kosambi, 1962, p. 2). As noted by Kunal Chakrabarti (2008), for Kosambi, religion was a "tool of the state – which meant the ruling classes" (Kosambi, 1975, p. 292; my emphasis) – and "the Brahmin was an essential adjunct of the state in reducing the mechanism of violence" (Kosambi, 1975, p. 313).

In a highly dynamic and pluralistic scenario in India, these sociological perspectives stand valid even today, for a better understanding into the spurt of the new movements

– religious, spiritual and charismatic. These offer several insights into the evolution of the ‘guru phenomenon’ in the country. Despite having access to a wide pantheon of the divine, what makes a people of a nation in current civilized and better literate times, cut across all barriers of caste and religion (also class) and surrender one’s all to that one ultimate authority called a ‘guru’? What makes him ‘god’? – while having the freedom to choose this point of influence from an extensive and easily accessible array. What makes these religious groups guided by their leaders to organize themselves around shared meanings and political patronage?

In Sanskrit, *Guru* means “teacher” or “master,” especially in the context of Indian traditions. The oldest references for the word are known to be found in ancient Vedic texts. “In pan-Indian traditions, *guru* is someone more than a teacher, traditionally a reverential figure to the student, with the *guru* serving as a counselor, who helps mold values, shares experiential knowledge as much as literal knowledge, an exemplar in life, an inspirational source and who helps in the spiritual evolution of a student” (Mlecko, 1982). The term also refers to “someone who primarily is one’s spiritual guide, who helps one to discover the same potentialities that the *guru* has already realized” (“Guru”, 2015). India has always showcased an enduring fascination for gurus, godmen, saints and their like. A revered persona, the ‘guru’ enlightens the mind of the follower by showing the way, guiding through initiation and/ or instructing in religious rituals and procedures. Maya Warrier, an expert on Hindu Traditions in modernity at the University of Winchester, UK, writes that “the perceived resurgence of Hindu nationalist sentiments in India, particularly since the 1990s, occupies centre-stage in much of the current academic writing on contemporary Hinduism. This preoccupation with politicized Hinduism has meant that other developments in contemporary Hindu society, which run contrary to the dominant trend, have tended to go relatively unnoticed in recent academic literature. One such development has to do with religious belief and practice within some of the more popular modern guru organizations in India, many of which own and manage vast institutional and financial empires, command an international presence, and, within India, attract followers largely from educated, urban, ‘middle class’ sections of the country’s population” (Warrier, 2003). As a nation, we see this inclination increasingly, in contemporary times.

On the backdrop of these observations, this paper attempts to comprehend, appreciate and study the evolution and progression of the ‘guru’ tradition in India—with an understanding of some sociological perspectives, the need for a ‘Guru’ in the Indian context, role in Indian society, related psychoanalysis, and finally current trends. As we do so, this would only be the beginning of a journey in discovering the numerous traditions and movements that come to be associated with this phenomenon, each enshrined with its own trends, plentiful stories and abundant miracles—taking it to a new level, altogether. It is also important to note here that, the subject matter of this study is ever evolving and vibrant, with an ever growing list of such charismatic personalities in every corner of the nation - adding to the essence of what scholars term as the ‘living mythology’. The aim has been to achieve an understanding through critical research and not to hurt any religious sentiments. This being so, each concept has the capacity to be elucidated further, for which there is limited scope here. Any inputs, suggestions and feedback are welcome.

THE 'GURU' PHENOMENON

*To ask why a person follows a godman is to ask why a little boy puts on his father's cap
or a little girl tries to walk in her mother's chappals [footwear]*

(Kakar, 1991, p. 41)

A well stated and known traditional etymology of the word 'guru' is holistically seen as the one who 'dispels the darkness of ignorance – leading towards light.' Where the syllable 'gu' stands for darkness and 'ru' means light. However, not all scholars may agree with the linguistic and philological interpretations of the term – seeing it more as a function of a society's cultural roots. Though the expression might have acquired a more colloquial and derogatory spirit in current times, 'gurus' continue to enjoy a prestigious stature in the Indian society while also appealing to the masses in large numbers. They are known to possess super-natural powers with mystic abilities for telepathy, healing and prophesy.

Psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar states "that godmen are not uniquely Indian though India seems to be their natural habitat." Reaffirming current trends he comments that "the swing away from the teacher-guru to the mystic-guru, to the godman, seems to have received its greatest momentum in the 7th century with the rise of the Bhakti movement in both north and south India. And with the spread of tantric cults around 1000 A.D., the guru not only showed the way to the Lord, but was the Lord. The guru was now the godman, an extraordinary figure of divine mystery and power (Kakar, 2011).

The Vedas speak of the 'oral' transfer of the most absolute and supreme knowledge (the *brahmavidya*) from the *guru* to the *shishya* (meaning disciple). In his book, *Saints, Folk & Elites* (Dhêrê, 1998), renowned researcher and author of over 100 books, Dr. Ramchandra Chintaman Dhere elucidates the crucial role of the 'saint'/guru in the Indian and folk cultures, blending in mythology, rituals and philosophy. Dhere has critically studied the works of reformer saints likening their discourses to that of a guru or mentor. The *guru-shishya parampara* (teacher-disciple tradition) is central and fundamental to the age-old wisdom from the Upanishads (c. 2000 BC). The term 'Upanishad' itself means 'sitting down near' a spiritual guru/ sage who imparts knowledge. These sages can be male or female. In ancient times, such knowledge was also sought for by kings who received the most 'appropriate' instruction and direction from the guru." It is largely an oral tradition, religious doctrine or experiential wisdom transmitted from a teacher to the student" (Grimes, Mittal, & Thursby, 2006, p. 40).

The renowned Bhagwat Gita (primarily a dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna on the battlefield at Kurukshetra) also stresses on the importance of finding a guru. This reinforces the significance of the transmitting of transcendental knowledge in Hinduisim. It is sometimes considered a *guru-shishya* relationship, wherein Krishna speaks on the substance and consequence of finding a guru (*The Bhagavad Gita*, 1977, pp. 148–149 [IV.34]). Another such popular relation is that of *Rama* (as guru) and *Hanuman* (as disciple) in the Indian epic Ramayana, where Rama guides Hanuman on multiple occasions. However, access to knowledge through the medium of a guru was seen as the privilege of a very small minority, transmitted only through scholarly Sanskrit and so highly restricted.

The 'guru' also comes to be associated with being a mystic, who practices mysticism, often with a reference to a mystery, mystic craft or the occult aiming for union with the Absolute, the Infinite, or God. "During the medieval period in India, the Bhakti and Sufi

saints stood for reform of society, emphasized on moral values of religion and included all in the fold of their community” (Sayeed, 2014, p. 139). These saints stressed on equality of all human beings, against all superstitions irrespective of caste/ class distinctions. At the time this occurred in India, the elite few enjoyed all privileges. The ethos of these saints instantly appealed to the underprivileged and illiterate masses at large, resulting in the saints becoming mentors and gurus. In the Indian framework, the practice of asceticism and austerity is looked upon with an element of high reverence—considered unattainable by the common man in his routine and materialistic transactions. Even the Vedic *ashrama* system, of four sequential stages in four periods, emphasizes on *moksha* (spiritual liberation) and eventual renunciation, not necessarily to be followed in specific age limits. The four *ashramas* in this order are: Brahmacharya (student), Grihastha (householder), Vanaprastha (retired) and Sanyasa (renunciation).

In his book about neo-Hindu movements, Reender Kranenborg (2002, p. 50; quoted after: “Guru”, n.d.) distinguishes four types of gurus in India: “the *spiritual advisor* for higher caste Hindus who also performs traditional rituals and who is not connected to a temple (thus not a priest); the *enlightened master* who derives his authority from his experience, such as achieving enlightenment. This type appears in bhakti movements and in tantra and asks for unquestioning obedience, and can have Western followers; and the *avatar*, a guru who is considered to be an incarnation of God, God-like, or an instrument of God, or who is considered as such by others.” For instance, the followers of the Swami Samartha movement consider him to be one of three successive reincarnations of Lord Dattatreya.

EVOLUTION OF THE INDIAN GURU

“In the ancient scriptures, the word *Guru* in the Vedas, describes the guru as, the source and inspirer of the knowledge of the Self, the essence of reality, for one who seeks” (Rigveda IV.5.6, quoted in: Mlecko, 1982, p. 35). Later Upanishadic texts like Chandogya Upanishad (Radhakrishnan, 1968, p. 412 [IV.9.3]), Taittiriya Upanishad (Radhakrishnan, 1968, p. 553 [III.1.1]), Katha Upanishad (Radhakrishnan, 1968, p. 610 [I.2.8]), Shvetashvatara Upanishad (Radhakrishnan, 1968, p. 750 [VI.23]) emphasize the indispensable role of the ‘acharya’ (teacher) to attain knowledge and insights leading to Self-knowledge. The ancient tradition of reverence for the *guru* in Shvetashvatara Upanishad is apparent, (which holds the guru as god).

A guru is also sometimes referred to as ‘Satguru’, meaning ‘true teacher’ in Sanskrit – *sat* meaning ‘true’ and a guru meaning ‘teacher’. Georg Feuerstein (1947–2012), a German Indologist specializing on Yoga, who authored over 30 books on mysticism, Yoga, Tantra, and Hinduism; translated among other traditional texts, the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali (Feuerstein, 1989) and the Bhagavad Gita (Feuerstein & Feuerstein, 2011), claims that “the preceptors were traditionally treated with great reverence, granted excessive authority, and identified with the *transcendental Reality*. He writes that partly to counter-balance this deification, some Hindu schools began to emphasize that the real teacher is the *transcendental Self*” (Feuerstein, 1990).

“The Shiva Samhita, a late medieval text on Hatha yoga, enshrines the figure of the guru as essential for liberation, and asserts that the disciple should give all his or her pro-

perty and livestock to the guru upon *diksha* (initiation)" (Mallison, 2007). Several verses from the Vishnu-Smriti (cf. Jolly, 1900, pp. 127 [XXX.46], pp. 128–129 [XXXI.1–10]) and Manu-Smriti (Bühler, n.d. [II.153, II.170, XI.60]) regard the spiritual teacher as the most revered coming second only to the mother and father. The Mundaka Upanishad (Radhakrishnan, 1968, p. 678 [I.2.12]) says that "in order to realize the supreme godhead, one should surrender one's self before the guru who knows the secrets of the Vedas". Many other scriptures from India's ancient wisdom support this ideology.

In terms of the Puranic references, we have in the Skanda Purana, a section on the Guru Gita, known to be authored by sage Vyasa himself, with a variety of renderings available in present times. "In the Siddha Yoga tradition, the Guru Gita is considered to be an "indispensable text" (Muktanda, 1984, p. xiv). Swami Muktananda chose 182 verses to create a unique version of the Guru Gita, which has its own melody for chanting (Muktanda, 1984, pp. 6–57). The Guru Gita is a verbal exchange between Lord Shiva and his consort Goddess Parvati seeking the knowledge of guru and liberator. In response to this, Shiva leads her through the significance of a guru, methods of worship and the importance of reciting the text. The text was also mentioned by female actor, Julia Roberts, in the feature film titled *Eat, Pray, Love*. She briefly refers dedicating the reading of the text to the happiness of one of the characters in the film. (Gardner & Murphy, 2010).

"The 8th century Hindu text *Upadesasahasri* of the Advaita Vedanta philosopher Adi Shankara discusses the role of the guru in assessing and guiding students" (Jagadananda, 1987, p. 5 [1.6]). Interestingly, there are references in scriptures to be alert and wary of 'fake' gurus who tend to simply exploit the disciple; also giving criteria to identify the authentic ones. According to Swami Vivekananda, a late nineteenth century Hindu teacher, "there are many incompetent gurus, and that a true guru should understand the spirit of the scriptures, have a pure character and be free from sin, and should be selfless, without desire for money and fame" (Sheldrake, 2014, p. 142).

Today, we have a variety of rituals associated with veneration of this master. The ancient *Vyasa puja* is traditionally held on *Guru Purnima* day when the expresses gratitude and focuses on one's progress on the spiritual path. A more recent spurt is the practice of the Guru Puja (worship) seeking guidance and encouragement. Most recent spiritual movements (like *Isha Foundation* by Sadhguru, *Art of Living* by Sri Sri Ravishankar) accentuate this by making it relevant and easy-to-do. *Guru Bhakti* (devotion to the guru) is considered important in many schools and sects.

CHARISMATIC AUTHORITY & PERSONALITY CULTS

The term 'charisma' was defined by Max Weber as "resting on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him" (Weber, 1947, p. 215, cf. Weber, 2015a, 2015b). Explaining the concepts of 'charismatic dominator' and 'charismatic leadership' in his works, Weber applies the term charisma to a "certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine

origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader." (Weber, 1947, p. 329) "In Hinduism, there is no centrally established religious authority, so people tend to follow such charismatic personalities. These gurus tend to live in their own ashrams. Many of these godmen acknowledge having had a guru themselves, as per the *guru-shishya* tradition. In recent years, many godmen have gained followers outside of India, which has increased their fame and wealth" (Lochtenfeld, 2002, p. 253). These often result in 'cult of personality'. Such charismatic authorities also come with their share of riddles and obscurities, making it almost impossible for people outside the movement to rationalize what they may consider ambiguous. For instance the case of the shrine of Om Banna (Om Singh Rathore) where several people stop by on their way to worship. This shrine of a 350cc Royal Enfield Bullet, is popularly known as Bullet Banna, located in Jodhour, India. Shrine. "Legend states that despite all efforts the motorcycle kept returning to the same ditch where Rathore had met with an accident. This came to be seen as a miracle by locals, and they began to worship the bike with a temple, priest and temple rituals eventually to its credit." ("A prayer for drunk rider, shrine for his bike", 2009). Another instance is that of the saint Baba Harbhajan Singh. "Many of the Indian army personnel posted in and around the Nathula Pass and the Sino-Indian border between the state of Sikkim and Chinese occupied Tibet have come to believe his spirit protects every soldier in the inhospitable high altitude terrain of the Eastern Himalayas. As with most saints, the Baba is said to also grant favours presumably to those who revere and worship him." (Samuel, 2002).

PERSPECTIVES ON PSYCHOANALYTICAL APPROACH

Academic literature considers a psychoanalytical approach to the guru-disciple relationship. "Culture and psyche as we know it are interrelated. Psychoanalyst, Sudhir Kakar, treats this relationship as a traditional form of the psychotherapeutic relationship" (Barrett, 2008, p. 145). He argues that "the 'guru' like the psychotherapist, heals the disciple through the relationship itself by serving as an object of identification". In his essay, '*The Guru as a healer*', Kakar (1991, p. 41) explains the special bond between the guru and the disciple, which has been at the core of religious movements throughout Hinduism's long history as a kind of 'idealizing transference', 'a strong need for merging into...the guru.' "Devotional surrender with such ritualistic features as the worship of the guru-godman's feet, bodily prostration and other forms of veneration on part of the disciple and divine grace or prasada on part of the guru-godman now marked the guru-disciple relationship." The operative word became 'love' rather than the earlier 'understanding'. "The ambiguities of thought and the agonisings of reason could be safely sidestepped since the way is no longer through Upanishadic listening, reflection, and concentration but through a complete surrender—the offering of *tana*, *mana* and *dhana* (body, mind and wealth) in a well-known phrase of north-Indian devotionalism." "Historian Irfan Habib feels that the devotees who flock to godmen suffer from some kind of security. The godmen continue to thrive as they draw strength and clout from politicians who know that they can mobilize large crowds. He calls this a vulgarization of Kabir's bhakti cult" (Gupta, 2014).

Kakar (2011) continues that "complementary to the movement of the guru from man to godman is the shift in the disciple from adult to child. The ideal disciple is one who is

unquestioning, pure of heart, and renouncer of all adult categories, especially of rational inquiry. Yet for the great mass of Hindus, the godman continues to be a beacon of their inner worlds, his attraction lying in more complex reasons than the mere victory of irrationality over reason, servility over autonomy, or of a contemporary dark age over an earlier golden era.”

“A major reason for the existence of the godman is the belief in his powers as a healer, of emotional suffering as much as bodily affliction. This healing function is clearly visible in godmen (and women) whose fame mainly depends on their reported healing abilities, rather than deriving from any mastery of traditional scriptures, philosophical knowledge or great spiritual attainments”, concludes Kakar. “It is the domination of the healing moment in the encounter of the godman and the follower which pushes the godman’s image towards that of a divine parent and of the follower towards that of a small child” (Kakar, 2011). Personalities with a huge following in this regard are Anandamayī Ma (1896-1982) and Shirdi Sai Baba (circa 1838–1918) known for their healing, yogic practices and other miracles.

DEIFICATION OF THE ‘GURU’ IN INDIA

The mystic ‘guru’ then clearly enters the realm of religion in India, as a significant aspect of social life becoming a part of an individual’s life, thereby influencing society and society’s impact on this new-found religion.

Taking From Kakar’s views, we can consider what Ronald Barrett says in his book *Aghor Medicine: Pollution, Death and Healing in North India* (2008), that, by extension one could view the deification of the guru, and the subsequent identification with that deity, as an attempt to deify the self. This proposition resonates with one Sarkar Baba’s most popular sayings: ‘The guru does not create a disciple. The guru creates another guru.’ Barrett adds that ‘deification might seem to be a powerful proxy for individuation but it presents dilemmas for psychoanalysis.’ “Individuation is a term often associated with Jung and his psychology. It is the development of the individual from the universal, which is the determination of the individual in the general and the process by which individuals in society become differentiated from one another” (Barrett, 2008, p. 145).

Kakar (1991) asserts that “individuation among Hindus must be understood in Hindu terms, as a process of internal self-awareness in which gurus and gods serve as transitional objects that disciples can dispose of once they have served their purpose. But this disposability may work better in theory than in practice, because unlike the temporary psychotherapeutic relationship, the guru disciple relationship is supposed to last a lifetime or more. Thus, if the guru is god, then the guru will always be a god from which individuation.” becomes impossible. Largely, this process culminates into his gradual ‘deification’, at times with a host of supporting devotional literature, songs, rites and rituals that did not exist before. In this case, we have the instance of the truly international devotion movement of Shirdi Sai Baba, who was a simple village fakir—accompanied by all

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² Jan van der Lans, *Volgelingen van de goeroe: Hedendaagse religieuze bewegingen in Nederland*, (translation – Followers Of The Guru: Contemporary religious movements in the Netherlands), Ambo, 1981 – reference in Joseph Pieper, Marinus van Uden, *Religion and Coping in Mental Health Care*, Netherlands, 2005, Pg 33

the paraphernalia that comes with the process of transformation to 'divinity'. The events that follow conform their entry into religion and its corresponding pantheon. We have had the recent row between Shankaracharya Swarupanand and devotees of Sai Baba over his 'deity' status at the '*Dharma Sansad*' (Arora, 2014) – a platform for restoration of the true spirit of Hinduism and a previous controversy of a high profile 'scientist' from Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) coming to the saint for 'blessings' and express gratitude for the success of a critical space mission ("ISRO scientist visits Shirdi after success of 100th mission", 2012).

Jan van der Lans (1933–2002), a professor of the psychology of religion at the Catholic University of Nijmegen, wrote, in a book commissioned by the Netherlands based Catholic Study Center for Mental Health, talks about an increased chance of idealization of the guru by the student leads to myth making and deification, and an increase of the chance of false mysticism (Van der Lans, 1981, p. 79, quoted in: Pieper & van Uden, 2005, pp. 33–34).²

PILGRIMAGE & RELIGIOUS TOURISM IN INDIA

Pilgrimage is part of a key religious and spiritual experience in Hinduism – a sacramental process between the pilgrim and the divine. Ancient texts like the *Aitreya Brahmana* (Rigveda VII.15–18) are also known to reinforce the need for the same. Known as the *tirth-yatra* (journey to a fording place), it is a quest to go across this world and enter into the realm of the invisible power. "It is estimated that around 250 million people perform pilgrimage every year in India. The Hindu places of pilgrimage are the symbols of their religious beliefs. These places have knitted the linguistically diverse population of the country socially, culturally and spatially at different integrative levels" (R. Singh, 2013, p. 21). Thus, "pilgrimage centres play an important part in the religious life of people: they provide a physical place and focus for devotional religion. As such, emergent devotional practices at these centres may receive social approbation from the highest religious authorities in the community, including gurus and the priestly class."

Thus the trending deification of 'gurus' aids in the growing popularity of 'guru-devotion' centres as pilgrimage destinations occupying a central place in contemporary religious practices in India. "Guru devotion sites may differ from Hindu pilgrimage sites that are associated with installed divinities, naturally occurring divinities, historically significant religious structures... Guru sites commemorate the 'accident' of a guru's birth or residence in a particular location. And are thereby comparatively delinked from 'traditional' sacred geographies and connected with communities associated with saints, gurus and guru devotion which have become an integral part of the contemporary religious landscape of India. These sites are of growing importance as they favour religious tourism destinations of the burgeoning middle-class" (Shinde & Pinkney, 2013). "Ranked among the top three richest temple trusts in the country, the" Trust of the Shirdi Sai Baba temple "earns around Rs. 5 million daily in offerings and donations" (as of 2013).³

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³ Cf. "Shirdi: Now, pay extra for VIP 'aartis' at Sai Baba temple", 2013; "5 wealthiest Temples of India", 2014; "India's top 10 richest temples", 2014. Sri Padmanabhaswamy Temple in Thiruvananthapuram (Kerala) is at No. 1, Tirumala Tirupati Venkateswara Temple, Temple in Tirupati (Andhra Pradesh) at No. 2 and Shirdi Sai Baba in Shirdi (Maharashtra) at No. 3.

THE 'GURU' IN MODERN TIMES

In times when science, religion, mythology and politics co-exist under one umbrella it becomes very difficult for the 'learned' man to reconcile them leave alone the chaos brimming in the mind of the common man. "At a time when aspirational India wants desperately to be cosmopolitan and yet retain a sense of pride in its culture, the appeal of godmen to the elite and unlettered alike shows no sign of waning" (Bhandare, 2013). Is the Indian society more vulnerable? Or, does this show up so blatantly in the practice of democracy and secularism? India's fascination with godmen and their 'miracles' has been enduring, and as politicians lend support, their obscurities gain legitimacy defeating scientific temperament.

M.N. Srinivas, in his book *Social Change in Modern India* (Srinivas, 1995), writes "the coming together of the politician and the renouncer: or man in ochre robes". In another book, *Caste: Its 20th Century Avatar* (Srinivas, 1996), he talks about "a strong tendency among members of the middle class to seek the help of gurus and godmen who they believe have supernatural powers to solve their practical problems in life". A variety of gurus and godmen including Sai Baba of Puttaparthi, Chinmayanada, Muktanada, Dadaji, Nirmala Devi, and others attract hordes of devotees from the middle class. An aspect of this magical orientation is the popularity of astrology. For instance, Sai Baba of Puttaparthi had surpassed the original Shirdi Saibaba in all respects (his apparent inspiration), only to be later discovered as prey to deceit and controversies. Another example is the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha wherein a living guru is revered for seeking spirituality. Aniruddha Babu too claims to be an incarnation of Shirdi Sai Baba. What then is faith?

On the other hand, sometimes a politician is considered more genuine on the basis of his/her propinquity to a trending guru. Indian journalist and politician, Khushwant Singh concludes "this kind of public display of reverence for holy men is a post-Pandit Nehru phenomenon." Here he talks about "Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, who regularly sought assurance from godmen and godwomen after assuming her office as Prime Minister" (K. Singh, 2006, p. 240). Amongst others, she is known to have often turned to her yoga guru Dharendra Brahmachari for advice. In addition to being successful entrepreneurs (by offering medicinal, yoga and spiritual therapies), they fund educational institutions and hospitals. The products manufactured and sold by Patanjali Ayurved Ltd. under the guidance of Yog Guru Swami Ramdev are admired world over and are known to give desired effects. These popular Gurus invest in humanitarian initiatives by caring for communities and the environment like adopting villages, supplying water to villages, organise blood donation camps, promote vegetarianism and run rehabilitation programs – some of which are run with on truly authentic grounds.

What makes guru devotion so enduring in India? In fast paced, stressed and aspirational times, gurus act as 'relieving agents' in the chaos of looming uncertainties and problems. Their magic, charisma and healing powers bring in a soothing effect with the promise of hope and assurance in the business of faith – even without guaranteed results. Guru Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Insaan from Punjab, heading a popular religious sect, performs at rock concerts and acts in films. Mata Amritanandamayi, (popularly known as '*amma*' meaning mother) is revered for her act of hugging people as a blessing and therapy.

Popular culture and collective media play a critical role in bringing about the desired resonance. Whether it is for their yoga, their discourses, or their healing powers, godmen continue to pervade in India. Recently, we have witnessed some not so famous and varied accounts of Radhe Ma, Asaram Babu, Rampal, Swami Nithyananda and some others making it challenging for the masses to distinguish the genuine from the fakes. While we could have innumerable yogis with healing powers who would have put in years of practice and meditation for attainment of self-realisation, one needs to be aware of counterfeit godmen on the rise. Today, people's associations like the Maharashtra Anhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti (MANS – meaning Maharashtra Blind faith Eradication Committee) and Indian Rationalist Association, through secret missions, create awareness and try to protect interests of the common man against religious garbs and frauds.

We have come a long way from the traditional guru to the contemporary godman (woman). It has brought faith straight into living rooms, easily accessible and alleviating any guilt at becoming increasingly acquisitive in a materialistic world. Today, political agenda has interwoven facts, myths, fictions, to create new religious legends, while mobilizing public opinion. While we continue to align ourselves with the demands of modernity and globalization, we cannot ignore the apprehensions and anxieties that come with it. In this era of liberalization, the India's enduring fascination for the 'guru' persists. In conclusion: "What the mysterious is I do not know. I do not call it God because God has come to mean much that I do not believe in" (Nehru, 1985, p. 28).

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