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Hindu Spiritualism for a Neoliberal Age

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The rise of tele-gurus signals a Hindu spirituality that resonates with the language of global capitalism, political Hindutva, and cultural consumption.

At any time of the day, if you switch on the television and flick through channels, you would see several — male, female; young, old — self-styled, ‘charismatic’, ‘spiritual gurus’ addressed with honorific terms — *Sant! Bapu! Baba! Guru! Maharaj! Bhai! Amma! Mata! Ma! Didi!*

These gurus have an immense presence in cities, though some might be active in rural areas as well. You might have passed through or visited their high-profile *ashrams*, located in prominent neighbourhoods. You also might have noted the composition of their followers: mostly young and who reckon themselves as middle class. These gurus assume several roles and participate in the political life of India. Their economic aspects are also far reaching: drawing from personal donation to expensive-lines of products to earning from media contents and spiritual sessions.

A few high-profile gurus — Asaram Bapu, Ram Rahim, Rampal — have been the subject of “breaking news”. They were found guilty of crimes such as rape, murder, abduction, land grabbing, and so on. You might ponder why, despite repeated such incidents, gurus remain popular amongst the public.

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You might have found answers in oft-repeated explanations they brainwash their disciples, or that their followers are automatons, or they perform ‘tantric rituals’ and hypnotise people. But these ways of thinking simply ignore people’s own imaginations and demands that inspire them towards a guru. It is important to identify the sources of their authority. In turn, the gurus show us the ways in which religion operates outside mainstream political circles and how it generates consumer choices.

Television has played an instrumental role in popularising and bringing these gurus to the homes of millions. A huge number of channels — over 50 now — have replicated the success of Aastha and Sanskar, the pioneering devotional channels of the 2000s. Not only have these channels deepened the reach of existing gurus, but they have facilitated many ‘new’ gurus, unaffiliated to established guru lineages or *sampradayas*. The likes of an Asaram Bapu, a Sudhanshuji Maharaj, a Morari Bapu, a Jaggi Vasudev, a Sri Sri Ravishankar, or a Baba Ramdev could be termed as tele-gurus; given the deep associations between them and television channels and how they have utilised the media to further consolidated their followers.

The life and career of these tele-gurus illustrate the character of contemporary Hindu spirituality and how it is promoted, projected and practised. The gurus have incorporated media, market and politics to produce a Hinduism that is enchanting and alleviating — and hides or justifies their political and economic interests. These aspects show us how Hinduism operates in contemporary India. The implications and ramifications of such tele-guru movements are more far reaching than what is achieved through political Hindutva.

Tele-gurus started emerging at around the same time when Hindu religious fervour escalated with the political Hindutva movement and as Hindu imageries diffused with the telecast of *Ramayana* on Doordarshan. As scholars such as Rajagopal (2001) have pointed out, the telecast of *Ramayana* fed into the imaginations of Hinduness and a Hindu nation. The gateway that Doordarshan opened for the recomposition of religion was furthered by the liberalisation of the broadcast sector in the early 1990s. Newly launched television channels, including ATN, Sony TV, and Zee TV, were trying out a range of content to gain a larger audience and began to telecast programmes featuring gurus.

The tele-guru organisations were well placed to enter this new space. From the early 1980s, they had utilised media technologies to record audio and video on tape cassettes and distribute it via personal and organisational networks to followers. The early morning *satsang* programs of Asaram Bapu on Sony TV and Sudhanshu ji Maharaj on SAB TV were amongst the early entrants. Star TV would bring in preachers from ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) and *sadhvis* from Brahmakumaris.

The first lot of tele-gurus might not have directly participated in the Hindutva movement, but they certainly made optimal use of the moods, motivations, and imageries made available in the emerging climate of political Hindutva.

Guru as a cultural form

Followers might stretch the lineage of their tele-gurus to the gurus mentioned in scriptures and, sometimes even back to the Vedic period. This kind of association is far-fetched, but draws attention to how the authority, charisma and aura of tele-gurus are seen as an integral element of cultural history.

These gurus represent a Hinduism which is fuzzy, unstructured, colourful, and which is given a desirable shape in different times and contexts. To a large extent, these tele-gurus do not come from any established tradition or style of devotional system. Nor can all of them be placed in any specific devotional style. However, what is remarkable is the presentation of spirituality and their own insertion as a *cultural form*.

The guru is imagined and accepted as an integral component of a tradition of *guru-shishya parampara*. Their charismatic authority is accepted and legitimised not just because of contents, proficiencies and personal intervention in the lives of the followers but also by presenting themselves in familiar cultural terms: as a *brahmajñani sant* —a self-realised self — or as an *avatar*. Some claim to be ‘born-divine’, some claim their spirituality to ‘sudden revelation’ while many others claim to have achieved the gift of self-realisation through devotion to their guru or individual efforts and penance in the Himalayas.

Spiritual Bricolage

The distinctive feature of tele-gurus is their ability to develop a *spiritual bricolage* that mixes and matches varied elements together that not only attract people with differing interests and inclinations but connect them culturally. The guru is one among several means through which people hunt for answers to existential concerns and ways to achieve a ‘happy, healthy, and prosperous life’. For example, every *arti* (prayer) or *chalisa* (hymn) has a verse similar to “*sukh sampati ghar aave, kast mite tan ka*” (Let happiness, wealth come to the house and bodily sufferings be cured).

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Implicit in tele-guru spirituality is a seamless accretion of capitalism and consumerism which simultaneously captures urban aspirations and accommodates lifestyle choices and buttresses religious imaginations, invokes cultural pasts, and brings cultural nationalism into discussion. The gurus present spirituality as upbeat, fashionable and urban, something which is imbued with abilities of self-authorship and self-management of everyday life.

This spirituality resonates with the language of global capitalism, political Hindutva and cultural consumption. The gurus, as they discuss the vices of modern (read non-Hindu, western) life, valorise Hindu scriptural knowledge, and involve modern science and scientific terms to eulogise vegetarianism and Hindu cultural pasts. For the tele-gurus, the misery of human life lies in the modern political, economic and social system. They often assert that modern institutions are short of providing answers to questions of being and existence, and ask people to return to cultural pasts.

This very presentation grants them abilities to occupy multiple spaces, involve in several activities and freely traverse across— historical and contemporary cultural, political and economic milieus. It not only legitimises charismatic abilities of the guru but also allows easy camouflage of their politics and economics.

Notable in this is their presence in corporate houses where they are often found delivering leadership lectures or offering personality building workshops. In such sessions, they would syncretise languages of spirituality with modern management terms and discuss time-management and development and conservation of somatic and spiritual energy. They touch upon aspects of family ties and relationships, cultivation of ‘good’ habits and ‘expected’ behaviour at the workplace. All these varied topics, largely, culminate in suggestions and methods for having a ‘happy, healthy and prosperous’ life and achievement of self-realisation.

The business of spirituality

In tele-guru spirituality is a seamless accretion of economy, polity and spirituality. The economic linkages between tele-gurus and ever-expanding devotionism on channels is just one of the many lines that is changing the face of religion in contemporary times. The growth of digital technologies not only has democratised the ownership and distribution of spiritual contents but also personalised and regularised contact between the guru and followers. With these technologies, people can connect with the guru at their convenience. The gurus have their channels on digital platforms such as YouTube. They also stream spiritual sessions through their organisation's websites.

Yet, there are several modes of commercialising these sessions. Sometimes basic training programs are freely available while the advanced training session requires one to pay for attending the program. In some cases, such as Sadguru Jaggi Vasudev's Inner Engineering, subscriber can watch or participate from only one device, restricting the sharing of subscriptions.

These tele-guru-linked firms also claim their products as imbued with abilities that could enhance not only beauty or somatic growth but also enhance spiritual health.

Organisations have also found ways to utilise the network of followers for other business ventures. Baba Ramdev's Patanjali group, for instance, produces and market cultural products, spiritual wares, and even fast moving consumer goods through websites and physical stores. These consumer products are pitched as herbal, organic, chemical-free and ayurvedic. These tele-guru-linked firms also claim their products as imbued with abilities that could enhance not only beauty or somatic growth but also enhance spiritual health.

Unlike a regular company specialising in these consumer goods, a guru organisation has dedicated consumers and, compared to other firms, they may not have to spend much on advertisement. The production in guru organisation could be achieved through *seva* (service to guru) wherein a devotee or a follower is seen involved in the production units. The organisation could also market products manufactured by prominent followers. There is also a symbiotic relation between the tele-gurus and television channels. Asaram Bapu, for instance, signed an annual contract worth Rs. 1.75 crore with Sony TV in 2006-2007. Sony TV was eager to pay the popular guru to increase its Television Rating Points and increase advertising revenue. Going one step ahead, Baba Ramdev has full control over Aastha and Sanskar channels. Not-so-popular gurus or a guru-in making, though, might initially have to pay channels for air slots. However, once they hit the market, they can negotiate for prime time air slots and even fees for appearing on the channel.

Enchanting the middle classes

Tele-guru spirituality emerges as a tool and technology to correct and control everyday life events shaped by liberalised economies and globalised cities. It is practiced as technology of self, well-being, peace and happiness in everyday life that, in turn, is associated with contemporary urban subjectivity, urban aspirations, consumerism and changing nature of state and economy.

The tele-gurus produce novelties that enchant the urban middle class. They articulate the shift from religion towards spirituality as they reconfigure values, practices, modes of conduct as well as objects and objectives of spirituality and devotionism. The gurus locate themselves in a place of ambiguity drawing those confronted by the uncertainties of contemporary urban life and seduced by its worldly aspirations.

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