Manufacturing Consent: Creating Hierarchies in the Guru-Disciple Relationship

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Sexual abuse happens across the globe and in nearly every environment. Recognizing this, religion scholar Andrea Jain argues that focusing on a specific religious context can be distracting and detrimental to tackling what is a global and ubiquitous problem. She writes, "The appeal to the dangers of guru charisma and devotion as an explanation for sexual violence pulls our attention away from larger social structures and norms that cultivate a dominant global culture of sexual violence … and lends itself to an orientalist stereotype of South Asians, their religions, and other cultural products as despotic in contrast to white, so-called democratic religions or cultures" (2020, 124). Addressing the distinctive context of religion in the United States, religion scholar Megan Goodwin argues that narratives that correlate minority religions and sexual menace are a form of "*contraceptive nationalism* … a form of gendered white supremacist Christian nativism that minoritizes certain American religious traditions, compromising their legal protections, political influence, cultural cachet, and/or social credibility" (2020, 3).

Thus, analyzing abuse in guru-led communities – particularly in the West wherein their movements exist only as minority religions – one cannot dissociate allegations of abuse from their racialized context. For they emerge from within the historical narrative produced in the West wherein South Asian gurus were/are depicted as sexually predatory through racist discourses. Other scholars in this field, such as Philip Deslippe and David Neumann, have made similar observations. Oftentimes, such narratives vilify gurus in order to reinforce the sanctity of white womanhood. And as such, they confirm the historically repetitive pattern of white women weaponizing their imagined innocence and sexual purity to condemn men of color to racialized violence (often at the hands of white men).

But, the accounts of corrupt and sexually predatory gurus are global, and not limited to the racialized trope of white women victimized by South Asian men. The allegations cross boundaries of race and gender, age and geography. While the majority of South Asian celebrity gurus who have proselytized in the West have been accused of sexual impropriety, there are also "homegrown gurus," (non-South Asian gurus) who are similarly accused. In India, in recent years there have been several high-profile cases against celebrity gurus, who are currently jailed for their offenses. Celebrity gurus are extraordinarily popular and powerful, and perhaps abuse allegations are an unexpected effect of what Jacob Copeman and Aya Ikegame recognize as their new forms of "uncontainability," their ability to cross multiple domains simultaneously and to become "hyper gurus" (2012, 5).

And while abuse may not be any more prevalent in religious fields than in other institutional contexts, it is there as well. Furthermore, the social structures in the religious field, whether secrecy, power hierarchies, or conventions of obedience, are often particularly amenable to potential abusers. In many religious fields, and most definitely in guru-disciple relationships, institutional structures for activating resistance (Title IX offices, Human Resources departments, complaints departments, workers unions, and so on) simply do not exist. And thus, abuse can continue – unabated, unchecked, and often in secret

– silenced, and sometimes even suppressed by the devotional community. It may not be that abuse occurs in these contexts particularly, but that it can flourish unabated in these contexts particularly well.

In what follows, I focus on relations between Hindu gurus and their disciples and the social and group dynamics that emerge from that central relationship. I begin this project with the question of how scripturally sanctioned power relations become multiply enacted in practice – and how analysis of both might illuminate the current ubiquity of abuse allegations in contemporary guru movements. The social relations of the guru-disciple relationship are not fully reproduced in contemporary yoga. But its grafted branches are sometimes evident as yoga teachers teach according to apprenticeship models, employ somatic disciplinary regimes, retreat in ashrams, develop devotional sensibilities, assert forms of charismatic leadership, and activate encompassing methods of mind-body-soul sculpting that equate moral value with diet, bodily and social comportment, spiritual acumen, and yogic ability. It is my intention that such an analysis will tell us much about the guru field, but it may also shed light on relations of power that are applicable in other institutional environments.

The Guru-Disciple Relationship in Hindu Scriptures

In ancient India, gurus developed *gurukulas*, and therein they lived in residence with their students and taught them the Vedas, the most ancient Hindu scriptures. The idea was that through proximity to the guru, students would learn through not only direct instruction, but also through association and imitation. In the *Rig Veda*, the oldest of the Vedic scriptures, the guru, according to Joel Mleko, "is described as the source and inspirer of the knowledge of Self, or the essence of reality, for the seeker" (1982, 35). In the *Upaniṣads*, the corpus of philosophical texts that followed the *Vedas*, the role of the guru is cemented even further. Even the term *Upaniṣad* means "to sit next to," as in to sit next to a teacher, and long passages of the *Upaniṣads* are narrated as dialogues between student and teacher. Even the gods consult the guru Prajāpati to learn of the essence of reality. In both the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (IV, 4, 3) and the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* direct communication with the guru is believed to be indispensable for the acquisition of knowledge (see Mleko's article mentioned above) and independent spiritual study is repeatedly admonished.

In the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* (4th century BCE) it is decreed that the *śiṣya* (disciple) should have the same devotion for his guru as for God. In the epic literature, sometimes the guru is believed to be even higher than god (i.e. in the *Mahābhārata*, including the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and in the *Rāmāyaṇa*). There is also evidence for this in the early medieval *bhakti* (devotional) tradition (as early as the 11th century), and in the vast corpus of Tantric texts as well.

Such devotion should be displayed through selfless service to the guru. *Manusṃṛti*, a dharmaśāstric text, states that serving the guru is one of "the highest means of securing the supreme good" (*Manusṃṛti* XII, 83: translated by Patrick Olivelle, 2004, 216). The *Kulārṇava Tantra* (KT), also grants particular attention to the virtue of pleasing the guru, and its potential rewards. For example, the following passages:

"When satisfied and pleased, the Guru gives the Mantra; therefore, one should try to please him with devotion, wealth and even with his very life (KT XII, 18.)"

"The disciple should worship the Guru till he is pleased for once the Guru is pleased all the sins of the disciple are immediately destroyed (KT XII, 20)."

"O Deveśi! The disciple should from his mind, body, speech and actions please the Guru. O My Beloved! If the Guru so pleased says 'You are freed' then indeed the disciple attains to Liberation (KT XII, 25)." (All passages translated by Ram Kumar Rai, 2010, 191-192)

Importantly, regardless of the behavior of the guru, the disciple should offer obeisance and strive to please. "Bear the body for the sake of the Guru; acquire wealth for the sake of the Guru; exert yourself for the Guru even by sacrificing your life. Harsh words spoken by the guru should be taken as benedictions; even a beating from him should be taken as a gift" (KT XII, 54, from Ram Kumar Rai's translation of *Kulārṇava Tantra*, 2010, 195). The *Saura Purāṇa* (15.33) echoes this sentiment, arguing that "The guru remains as the authority to his pupil, regardless of how ignorant and immoral he might be." The *Mahābhārata* 12.109.24 states that "One must never despise the guru" and, as is well known, includes the story of Ekalavya, the accomplished archer who "happily" cut off his own thumb in an act of guru *dakṣina* (repayment for teachings; see Anonymous and John D. Smith, 2009, translators and editors, *The Mahābhārata*, 54).

Importantly, the disciple must not critique the guru, nor be in the presence of critique of the guru. *Manusṃṛti* states, "Wherever his teacher is slandered or reviled, he should either cover his ears or go somewhere else" (*Manusṃṛti* II, 200: translated by Patrick Olivelle, 2004, 216). The *Saura Purāṇa* (15.34) states, "Those who dissent from the guru with hatred, and abandon the guru are destined to die or live in hell" (translated by Minoru Hara, 1980, 101).

The Guru-disciple relationship in practice

But, of course, texts are not practice. Ancient textual injunctions cannot be transparently mapped onto contemporary lived religious experience. There are many injunctions that were (and are) ignored or discarded. In practice, narratives fracture and become even more multiply dispersed and differentiated. And most importantly, rules are not always obeyed.

But looking across the contemporary guru field, there is evidence for considerable consistency in the ways in which devotees demonstrate their reverence for their gurus through routine ritual acts of devotion and submission. *Pada pūjā* (the worship of the guru's feet demonstrating subordination and submission) is a routine ritual in most contemporary guru-led communities. Devotees honor the guru alongside as equal to god or as a gateway to god, pray to the guru, and chant 1,000 divine names in honor of the guru. They often place images of the guru for worship and guidance on their home altars and desks, and in their cars and wallets. As I discussed in my book *Reflections of Amma*, the guru's advice is revered and followed – as one Amma devotee memorably explained to me: "Amma knows me better than I know myself" (2014, 74). The guru is to be obeyed because the guru's power/knowledge is so far beyond that of the devotee's. One devotee explained this to me with the following anecdote: imagine a mother and a small toddler in a busy parking lot. If the mother tells the toddler to hold her hand, the toddler should not question and debate with the mother. If the toddler did so, it could have deadly consequences. Instead, the toddler must recognize that mother knows what is best, and obey. This is such a deeply held conviction among devotees that any critique of the guru is viewed as antithetical to the devotional ethos of the community and is, as a result, shunned, silenced, and condemned.

Modern guru communities also create social structures through which guru devotion is performed, both privately and publicly. Performances of guru devotion are embodied in community: from the worship of

the guru's image to public ritual devotions, to service in the guru's name. Guru devotion also governs the bodily comportment of devotees. Not only in the micro-actions of bowing before the guru, touching the guru's feet, stepping from the path so that the guru can pass, but also in how to bathe, what to wear, how to meditate, how to chant, and even how to breathe. Guru devotion also governs social and familial relations, that is to say, one's occupation, spouse, residence, and so on. There is no space inside of the guru-led community that operates outside of the guru's authority.

Further, the embodied performance of devotion to the guru is a publicly witnessed, continuous event. It is witnessed and surveilled by the devotional community, reinforced with increased social capital, and bolstered through the awarding of institutional authority. Devotees who please the guru through their devotion are rewarded for their commitment and service. A social economy develops, wherein the most obeisant and devout are rewarded for their devotion. The guru returns favor to those who are most committed; those who perform extraordinary sevā (selfless service) to the guru please the guru best, and are rewarded in turn. Often those who exhibit extraordinary devotion (made visible through obeisance) rise to high positions of authority within the charismatic movement.

As Marc Galanter shows in *Cults: Faith, Healing and Coercion*, psychological studies of charismatic movements (used here as a broad category encompassing guru movements) have shown that "a long history of operant reinforcement compliance prepares the members for accepting or rationalizing whatever is asked of them by the leadership" (1999, 143). This process of rationalization is evidenced by the narrative accounts of ex-devotees, who have created an entire field of literature wherein they explain how they rationalized and justified actions during their time as devotees that they now regret (after having separated from the movement). There are extensive examples available in the literatary genre of post-devotional memoir, wherein ex-devotees confront their previous lives and attempt to understand their values, morals, and actions when they were devotees of their guru (See for example Franklin 2020 and Stork 2018.)

Sociological studies have routinely revealed that as individuals deepened their commitments in high-demand groups, they increasingly identify themselves with the movement and they work to police its boundaries. Any challenge to the movement or its leadership becomes a challenge to the self. Disruption to the mission of the movement causes the individual to experience a fear of disapproval. That is to say, members experience emotional and physical distress whenever they are inclined to think negatively about their affiliation (see Marc Galanter's work mentioned above). This system of boundary policing creates strong communities centered around obeisance to a charismatic leader, but it also renders critique of the leader unthinkable. Critique of the guru becomes a challenge that threatens the very foundations upon which and through which the devotee's identity has been formed.

Conclusion

Thus, critique, including allegations of abuse, tends to emerge from outside of the guru devotional community or by one who has initiated some distance from the devotional relationship. Critique depends on a mental affirmation of individual agency. In issuing a critique of the guru, the disciple's agency usurps the guru's authority in its very formation. Furthermore, critique of the guru also requires an audience that recognizes the individual's agency as equal to, or even superior to, the guru's – an audience who is willing to usurp the power structure of the guru-disciple relationship to challenge the authority of the guru. If that audience is not present, then the individual would likely be silenced, reprimanded, punished, shunned, or ex-communicated.

Richly contextualizing contemporary abuse allegations may enable us to better understand why allegations of abuse are silenced so effectively for so long. Thinking through the shifting terrain of epistemological authority in modernity may also explain why gurus are being convicted with more veracity today than in the past as well. Focusing on agency (and the conception of the self in relation to the guru) and its possibilities within this particular set of power relations also demands critical attention when advocates in this field discuss terms, which have legal consequences, that turn upon its very substance, such as persuasion, coercion, and consent.

If scholars were to follow these threads, then we might uncover questions of power and agency, interrogate how they differ across cultural fields, and reveal the particularities of how social conditions operate as systems producing repeated and predictable results. Then, we might actually learn something not only about gurus in modernity, but also about sexuality, race, religion, and agency in a variety of institutional contexts.