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# Constructing Hindu Religioscapes: Guruism and Identity in South Asian Diasporic Fiction

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CONSTRUCTING HINDU RELIGIOSCAPES: GURUISM AND IDENTITY IN SOUTH  
ASIAN DIASPORIC FICTION

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
in  
The Department of English

by  
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B.A., University of Calcutta, 2003  
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August 2011

## **DEDICATION**

For my mother.

She taught me to be honest and strong and nursed me through some of the most difficult years of my life.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This project draws attention to the modern phenomenon of Guruism. I demonstrate that gurus in South Asian fiction are no longer adopting Guruism for the purposes of religion alone. In the novels I analyze, gurus use religion as a tool to resist dominant power structures, to strengthen/protect themselves in communities that stereotype, to access social/financial mobility and to obtain political power. The actions of these religious leaders have both positive and negative effects, as gurus ultimately desire authority to determine how South Asian communities conceive Hinduism, the function of Hindu religious institutions, and the role that Hinduism must play in the future. Gurus are empowered by their construction of religioscapes, or religious networks (social, financial and political), which negotiate identity through religion and instruct culture through imagination.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION: UNDERSTANDING DIASPORIC GURUISM

Different time periods have interpreted and responded to Hinduism in varied ways. Initially painted as a barbaric religion by the Western world (thanks to the likes of John Nichol Farquhar and James Mill), Hinduism increasingly began to be viewed in a favorable but skewed light after Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) established the religion as the ultimate path to spirituality, and India as the world's spiritual leader.<sup>1</sup> By the mid twentieth century, India became the mechanical, successful West's alternative to reconnect with the divine.<sup>2</sup> Modernization and science were not Indian fortes, but nirvana was of course another matter, for it could be attained in India. Today, a century after Vivekananda, not much has changed. The 'Mystic East' is still a "prevalent theme within Western understandings of India as 'the Other'" (King 2). Non-Indians, youths particularly, continue to turn to Hinduism, in whatever form (i.e. Iskcon etc.), and adopt what they consider an ancient, wise spiritual medium that leads to Nirvana. Sometimes wealth, names and identities are all sacrificed in an effort to embrace Hindu religious leaders or gurus, either in India or abroad, who guide countless souls all over the world into enlightenment.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Attending the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, in 1893, Vivekananda introduced Hinduism as the "mother of all religions" and announced that he was "proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance."

<sup>2</sup> Images/ideas about spirituality, gurus, yoga, sandalwood tilaks, and tulsi beads are always recognized as Hindu and Indian.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Richardson describes a number of court memorandums and reports on court cases conducted against cults in the United States. The "Queens County Hare Krishna Case," for instance involved alarmed parents who accused Iskcon of having deluded their children into leaving their families and everything that their life had hitherto stood for (83). Modern Hinduism is much attuned to the market for Hindu spirituality. Iskcon devotees and monks, for instance, hand out religious pamphlets on the streets while chanting and singing.



The image of India as ‘Mystic’ has seeped into the Indian perception of itself. As Edward Luce points out, “India had labored too long under the burden of spiritual greatness that Westerners have for centuries thrust upon it and which Indians had themselves got into the habit of picking up and sending back (with a cherry on top).”<sup>4</sup> While prophets in other religions date back to yesteryears, we may say that Hinduism, through its gurus, seems to constantly birth “prophets.”<sup>5</sup> Gurus, the ambassadors of the ‘Mystic East,’ are happy to climb up the spiritual pedestal particularly in South Asian diasporas. *Constructing Hindu Religioscapes* foregrounds diasporic constructions of Hinduism and investigates gurus who are in the “habit of picking up and sending back” representations of ‘Mystic’ India (Luce).<sup>6</sup>

I analyze the guru figure in: V.S. Naipaul’s *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), Cyril Dabydeen’s *The Wizard Swami* (1985), Sasthi Brata’s *The Sensuous Guru: The Making of a Mystic President* (1980) and Anita Desai’s *Journey to Ithaca* (1996).<sup>7</sup> Gurus, in these fictions, recreate Hindu spirituality through Guruism, which German Indologist, Axel Michaels, sees as a form of modern Hinduism.<sup>8</sup> He describes it as a “Western-oriented and especially active proselytizing form of Hinduism founded by charismatic persons (Gurus) with a corpus of

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<sup>4</sup> Introduction, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Gurus, like prophets, perform daily miracles, as they themselves claim, and are revered because of the miracle that they appear to be. For example, Prahlad Jani aka Mataji claims that for the last seventy years he has neither consumed food/water nor has he urinated or passed stools. Doctors in a hospital closely watched him and experiments were conducted on him. See Koppikar, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Here I ascribe to Jenny Sharpe’s definition of diaspora in her essay “Postcolonial Studies is the House of US Multiculturalism.” Sharpe writes “Diaspora “designates the political and economic refugees, Third World immigrant and exile communities that inhabit advanced industrial and newly-industrializing nations and city-states” (119).

<sup>7</sup> As is obvious, these texts range over a period of time and I believe that this is a testimony to the timeless significance and continuous resurgence of the guru figure in the south Asian diasporic imagination. I have examined these texts with attention to the diverse historical and political conditions within which the plots of the fictions have been placed. In the novels I have chosen, the guru is the main character who fuels the plot. I do not discuss novels like M. G. Vassanji’s *Amriika*, where the guru figure is present, albeit in the peripheries.

<sup>8</sup> He dates the rise of the latter from 1850.

esoteric writings of the Gurus predominantly in English” (22). Guruism is “modern Hinduism” precisely because it is proselytizing in nature and is practiced in English, thus allowing it to penetrate any language barriers that non-Indian disciples of gurus might face. However, I wish to revise Michaels’ definition of the term. Guruism is not necessarily “Western-oriented” today, nor is it practiced for the purposes of religion alone. Gurus and their disciples in *The Mystic Masseur*, *The Wizard Swami* and *The Sensuous Guru: The Making of a Mystic President* are of South Asian origin. The guru in *Journey to Ithaca*, charmed by the Western perception of Hinduism, adopts Guruism in India. All four gurus are attracted to religion primarily to help themselves and their South Asian communities.

Naipaul, Dabydeen and Brata’s gurus practice Guruism and use religion as a tool to survive diasporic (dis)location in an attempt to facilitate the imaginative rediscovery of the postcolonial Hindu self. In other words, through the instruction of Hindu philosophy and the construction of socio-religious institutions such gurus provide their predominantly South Asian disciples with a location within the host country. Rooting the self via religion eases the diasporic experience, which in some cases can be unpleasant. The Indian diaspora has “suffered greater harassment than most others, having been expelled from Aden, Burma and Uganda, partially repatriated from Sri Lanka, and subjected to discrimination and harassment in Kenya, Guyana, Surinam and Fiji” (Parekh vii).<sup>9</sup> South Asians continue to “remain everywhere under pressure to ‘integrate’ into Western ‘host’ societies by abandoning much of their socio-religious...heritage” (Menski 243). Gurus examined in this project are able to provide a remedy for the “pressure” that diasporas entail. They refuse to abandon their “socio-religious” heritage and insist that

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<sup>9</sup> Parekh writes that “Although the Indian diaspora of around eleven million people is smaller than its Jewish, African, Chinese and other counterparts...it is more widespread than others, and also both more varied in its religious and social composition and more uneven in its cultural achievements” (vii).

complete integration with the host society is neither desirable nor necessary. South Asian communities have become “more religious after migration than ever before” because of the social, cultural, financial and political power that Hinduism promises in the host country (Hinnells 2).

Created by a diasporic writer who sees the guru as a solution to the problems in India, Desai’s guru travels to India where the answer to her spiritual dilemmas may be found.<sup>10</sup> Although she has disciples from all over the world, this guru too caters primarily to Indians. *Journey to Ithaca* is about the West’s continued romance with the spiritual enlightenment that India provides, but the novel resists a re-metaphorization of India as the land of spirituality by presenting the reader with a new kind of Hinduism. Desai’s half Egyptian/half-French female guru sees enlightenment as a journey within, not without. By constructing a non-Indian guru who has the authority to redefine India, Desai seems to return the power to characterize India into the hands of the West, but the novel also invites the perception that Guruism today is neither gendered nor is it limited to Hindu gurus alone.

All the four gurus examined in this project reconfigure Hindu spirituality. They constantly reinvent Hindu traditions and institutions in their struggle for identity via religion, and are, in the process, shaping modern Hinduism.<sup>11</sup> They have adopted Guruism to resist racial intolerance, violence, powerlessness (lack of a political voice, fear of political repression and absence of social respect), crippling stereotypes and, in some cases, the paucity of infrastructure

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<sup>10</sup> Desai is born to a German mother and a Bengali father. Although she grew up in India, she was always aware of how she was different from the other Indian children. She has since moved to the US and lives there. I have included this novel in this project precisely because of Desai’s Indo-German identity and the fact that she stays in the US. I suggest that although the novel is set in India, Desai’s mixed racial identity and her location colors her perception of India.

<sup>11</sup> I use the phrase “diasporic gurus” to refer to gurus in the diasporic context.

(for minorities) that hinders their social/economic progress.<sup>12</sup> These leaders announce their presence through social/cultural networks in an effort to gain access to the community's imagination. My examination of the mechanism of Guruism, and its construction and instruction of Hindu (especially diasporic) imagination, has led me to understand how religion, through imagination, assists the global cultural flow. To decipher this flow, I borrow from Arjun Appadurai's concept of "scapes" to coin the term "religioscapes." The term and its relation to my project are explained in detail later, suffice to say here that religioscapes are "scapes" of imagination, both within and without our minds. Such "scapes" are impregnated with interconnected religious images that influence the identity of those who create and maintain religioscapes (or religious networks).<sup>13</sup>

*Constructing Hindu Religioscapes* intervenes on numerous levels in postcolonial studies and South Asian diaspora criticism. While it is true that "postcolonialism is a late comer to the field of religion," research has been conducted about Hinduism in the diasporas since the 1990s (Sugirtharajah xii). John R. Hinnells appreciates the "growth in the studies of migrant religions," calling it a "welcome scholarly development" (2). Both Richard King and Sharada Sugirtharajah have discussed Hinduism as a Western construct, arguing that Hindu Nationalists and the Hindu diaspora adopted the Orientalist versions of Hinduism.<sup>14</sup> Harold G. Coward's book focuses specifically on the South Asian religious diaspora, however, none of the essays theorize the guru figure.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> To illustrate this I have provided a historical analysis of the culture and the society depicted in the novels examined in this project.

<sup>13</sup> In some cases, owing to the images produced and marketed by religioscapes, diasporic reconstructions of Hinduism contribute to both informing and forming South Asian identities globally.

<sup>14</sup> See King, 1999. See Sugirtharajah, 2003.

<sup>15</sup> See Hinnells, 2000.

In *Guru English*, Srinivas Aravamudan discusses V. S. Naipaul's *The Mystic Masseur* and R. K. Narayan's *The Guide* as works that "allude to politicians using religious languages in order to communicate with diverse audiences" (241).<sup>16</sup> But Aravamudan's work is not about gurus or their role in the South Asian diasporic imagination, and his focus is on the style of writing employed by writers such as R. K. Narayan and V. S. Naipaul to portray religion and politics in the figure of the guru as a phenomena of Guru English.<sup>17</sup> Indrani Dutta-Gupta's dissertation "The Theme of the Guru in *Jhabvala's* New York Novels" (1996) looks at the guru figure as a metaphor, but she does so only to show Jhabvala's art of novel writing as a spiritual journey. Concentrating on Jhabvala alone, Dutta-Gupta does not discuss how the guru plays out in the works of South Asian diasporic writers.

*Constructing Hindu Religioscapes* is the first extensive critical study of the guru in South Asian diasporic fiction that examines the guru's role in the formation of modern Hinduism. This project insists on the importance of analyzing religion, which both forms and informs community through imagination, in the South Asian diaspora.<sup>18</sup> Finally, it provides a theoretical framework to interrogate postcolonial constructions of Hinduism, many of which tend to be Orientalist in

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<sup>16</sup> Aravamudan basically reconceptualizes cosmopolitanism and argues that cosmopolitanism is not just a Western discourse, but that it may also be refashioned from South Asian religiosity.

<sup>17</sup> Aravamudan describes the phrase "Guru English" first as a register and then as a discourse. "As a register," he writes "Guru English is a *theolinguistics*, generating new religious meanings. Analyzing religion through language, and language through religion" (6). As a literary discourse, he suggests that Guru English "uses multilingual puns, parody and syncretism that tend to open-ended and indeterminable futures that can influence the religiously inclined and also entertain those not so disposed" (6).

<sup>18</sup> Pirbhai, discussing "the centrality of religious identification throughout South Asian civilizations" writes that: "rooted as the majority of indentured peoples are in religious tenets and customs, their literatures are often grounded in a distinctly Hindu ethos. By extension, the South Asian diaspora can itself be examined in terms of its multiple sites of religious identification, primarily those of Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism" (9). My project examines South Asian diasporic communities primarily through its representation of its "Hindu ethos."

nature. My work primarily aims to enhance our understanding of gurus, Hinduism and spirituality in a globalized, transnational world.

### **The Birth of the (Postcolonial) Diasporic Guru**

This section introduces the diasporic guru, the primary actor in the business of Guruism today. I suggest that the diasporic guru has evolved from the pre-colonial and colonial gurus, and it is crucial to distinguish the three types of gurus.<sup>19</sup> This evolution has been triggered by and is indicative of the shifting power structures in India. I briefly examine the pre-colonial guru by tracing the origin of the word “guru.”<sup>20</sup> In ancient Indian literature, the word guru is used to refer to parents, other elders, the planet Jupiter and teachers.<sup>21</sup> Sometimes the guru is God-like or even the incarnation of God. In “various popular literature, in India herself too, the word ‘guru’ is explained in the parts ‘gu’ and ‘ru,’ as descriptions for light and darkness: the guru is then the person who brings the student from the material darkness into the spiritual light” (Kranenborg 50). The guru in South Asian tradition stands basically for the teacher (even a moral/spiritual mentor) who guides his disciples to a rightful destination, but a clear definition of the term “guru” is lacking.<sup>22</sup> This has partially allowed the word to be open to interpretation.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> There have been two distinct changes in the role/function and representation of gurus—the birth of first the colonial guru and then of the postcolonial guru.

<sup>20</sup> According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) the Sanskrit word “guru” refers to “A Hindu spiritual teacher or head of a religious sect. Also in gen. or trivial use: an influential teacher; a mentor; a pundit.” As an adjective it may be used to mean “weighty, grave, dignified.” The usage of the word in the English language may be traced back to 1613. However, the OED does not trace the Indian usage of the term “guru.” This is true also of the word “swami.”

<sup>21</sup> In the *Mahabharata*, for example, gurus have access to the weapons (usually extremely powerful) used by the Gods. Gurus only have to recite a few Sanskrit verses before the Gods shower them with weapons and blessings. In such texts, however, gurus are different from *swamis* (a term that refers to learned men and sometimes even to husbands), *pandits* (who have complete knowledge of the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* and who conduct pujas and other religious rites), and *sannyasis* (a Hindu ascetic who had given up the pleasures of domestic life).

<sup>22</sup> I am using the male pronoun here, as the gurus in such literatures are generally male.

<sup>23</sup> While for Farquhar the “true modern *sannyasi*” is any “convert from Hinduism to Christianity” (qtd. in Sugirtharajah 100), for William Jones all Brahmins are Hindu priests (Sugirtharajah 25).

However, I argue that after colonization there is a shift in the perception and representation of gurus. The colonial guru is less respectable. One of the ways to “know” India, as Bernard Cohn explains, was to create Indian history by placing it alongside European history. Thus surrounding the figure of the guru two basic ideas developed. Initially:

Brahmans, yogis, and sadhus were ‘gymnosophists,’ followers of creators of the Pythagorean ideas about the transmigration of souls. These holy men in their benign mode were naked philosophers who in some medieval European traditions were the symbols of natural goodness ‘who embodied the possibility of salvation without revelation...outside the established church.’ (Cohn 79)

The idea of the “good” Brahman, however, was not approved of by the likes of Warren Hastings, since these religious authorities received “a degree of personal respect almost amounting to idolatry” (qtd. in Cohn 26). Not surprisingly then:

Brahmans and yogis...become the perpetrators of superstitions, which they [Europeans] created and manipulated to mystify and keep subordinated the rest of the Hindu population of India...The yogi, the sannyasi, the fakir, the sadhu had by the eighteenth century been converted into living devils and the followers of all that was lascivious and degenerate in Greek and Roman religion, the worship of Pan and Priapus. (79)

The individual identities of the yogi, the fakir, the sannyasi and the guru were thus flattened and rendered powerless.<sup>24</sup> This half-wit colonial guru, who replaced the omniscient pre-colonial guru, is not useful in a practical world. The colonial guru’s powers are limited to the realm of spirituality. Used as a tool of colonialism, such gurus are portrayed in works like Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim*, and these “living devils,” though holy and spiritual, are looked down upon.<sup>25</sup>

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In the plan Hastings created in 1772 to govern Bengal, Brahmins were even identified as “professors of law” (Cohn 26). Today the term “guru” is applied to denote expertise of any kind—thus the guru of Wall Street, or the guru of telemarketing etc.

<sup>24</sup> In texts like J. N. Farquhar’s *The Crown of Hinduism* (1913), Hindu practices that involved paying obeisance to gurus were deemed meaningless and useless “superstition” (See Sugirtharajah 97). Texts like these seem to render the guru powerless. Gurus, swamis, pandits and sannyasis are usually all Brahmins. But not all Brahmins are religious leaders and therefore it is inaccurate to assume that all Brahmins perpetuated superstitions.

<sup>25</sup> Kipling’s *Lama*, a Buddhist, religious teacher from Tibet, directs the young Anglo-Indian boy, Kim, to his destiny. Interestingly, however, he too is directed by Kim for he does not know his

Today, Hinduism is not understood (or even constructed) only through the eyes of the people who had once “colonized” it. The postcolonial guru, the most popular cultural icon that is associated with South Asia currently, has trumped the devalued, colonial Kipling guru. Movies like *The Guru* (2002), *The Love Guru* (2008), *Holy Smoke* (1999) and *Eat, Pray, Love* (2010) showcase modern Indian gurus who are crucial to an individual’s spirituality and enlightenment, regardless of their ethnicity and religion.<sup>26</sup> These gurus are neither “living devils” nor “perpetrators of superstitions” (Cohn). Rather, such gurus romanticize Hinduism with an Orientalist’s fervor, but also endeavor not to dismiss the religion’s value since Hindu identity stems from it. They practice Guruism and are dedicated to understanding identity through religion. The guru’s right to disseminate and interpret Hinduism in any way provides the guru with authority, hitherto somewhat suppressed. Guruism thus allows gurus to retrieve the postcolonial Hindu self from the humiliation that colonialism has bestowed (where gurus were either stupid or devilish, and Hinduism was a horrifying religion).<sup>27</sup>

During British colonialism, as Farquhar writes, Christianity was “required to sow the seeds of spiritual religion and healthy moral life” (qtd. in Sugirtharajah 104). Guruism now is “required” to do the same. As Edward Said asserts, Orientalism is “a Western style for

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way around India. Forster’s *A Passage to India* also comes to mind here. The Brahmin professor/priest in Forster’s novel, Professor Godbole, is always in a muddle and is often the source of trouble.

<sup>26</sup> While in the first two movies gurus have been imported into the diaspora, in the last two movies individuals have exported themselves to India in search of a guru. Whether the rendition of these gurus is sarcastic or not, if India appears in modern cinema it is usually representing spirituality and showcasing gurus.

<sup>27</sup> Orientalists created a negative image of India. For instance, James Mill, describing the Indian religion in the *History of British India* writes that Hinduism was: “The worship of the emblems of generative organs” (Vol. 2, Chapter 6). Mill had never been to India and did not even know any of the native languages of India. He obviously then, did not have any idea of what he was saying. However, both the young English officers sent to India, and natives of India were reading Mill. And in the case of the former, this was their guide to India. For a detailed analysis of how scholar-administrators “created” Hinduism see Sugirtharajah.



dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (73). Guruism then is a postcolonial invention that dominates and restructures the postcolonial self both within the “home” and the diaspora.<sup>28</sup> However, by trying to redeem themselves through a revision of Hinduism, gurus tend to play into Orientalist stereotypes. This is primarily why postcolonial representations of gurus also invite sarcasm.<sup>29</sup> As I will show, the postcolonial guru is an important factor in the business of Hinduism today.

### **Gurus and the Shankaracharya Tradition**

The guru has always been a crucial figure in Hinduism, primarily since there is no fact book that clearly explains what constitutes Hinduism and clarifies how to be Hindu. The most influential teacher of Hindu philosophy in India is the Adi guru Shankaracharya (788 CE - 821 CE). The Adi guru first attempted to institutionalize Hinduism and formed the Advaita Vedanta, the most popular school of Hindu philosophy in India.<sup>30</sup> He created *Mathas* or temples in four corners of the country, where (together with the deities) the guru also resides and is easily reachable by the disciples. Gurus were made the ultimate authority on Hindu philosophy since Vedic texts could only be accessed and best interpreted by them. After the Adi guru’s death, each successive guru took the title of Shankaracharya. Alternately seen as philosopher and saint, Shankaracharyas do not just preach Hinduism they also intervene in political arenas.<sup>31</sup> Thus the

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<sup>28</sup> To recall Said, “The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (71).

<sup>29</sup> In his article, “Using Ditsy Maxims for Erotic Self-Help,” Stephen Holden describing *The Guru* writes that “its intercultural perspective is as naïve as a period spoof of pseudo-hip swingers flapping around Maharishi Mahesh Yogi after his discovery by the Beatles.”

<sup>30</sup> The two other major schools are *Visishtadvaita* and *Dvaita*. These too were propounded and made popular by the gurus *Ramanuja* and *Shri Madhvacharya* respectively.

<sup>31</sup> India’s political leaders have met with these gurus publicly from time to time. The current Shankaracharya has been travelling the world trying to reach out to the diasporic Hindus. For example, he met up with the Anglo-Asian Friendship Society in England to discuss the

Adi guru and the Shankaracharyas who have followed him have been integral to how Hinduism has progressed in India. The role/importance of Shankaracharyas is ingrained in Hindu tradition, and Hindus worldwide revere these religious leaders.

The idea that Hinduism in South Asian diasporas can be consolidated by gurus, who are Shankaracharya-like figures, thus is not surprising. Diasporas in Dabydeen, Naipaul, Brata and Desai's fictions tend to look towards a guide to both validate their own Hinduism and to be acknowledged. Yet, the diasporic gurus are different from the Shankaracharyas. Oddly enough, because their approach is somewhat Orientalist in nature, they are modernizing both the role of the guru and the function of Hinduism by taking institutional Hinduism to the streets, and by using religion as the means by which the "masses may become politicized."<sup>32</sup> Through the guru's interference in politics his devotees or disciples engage with the host country, and their involvement with the action of the present points to a future when the diaspora can "grow." Hatched primarily from diasporic dissatisfaction, the diasporic guru is fundamentally a political/social/cultural leader who negotiates South Asian identity (diasporic or otherwise) chiefly through a religious worldview. To understand modern Hinduism, this project focuses on gurus who conduct all Hindu rites and ceremonies, and are thus considered by South Asians to be one of the main authorities, outside the textual realm, on Hinduism.

### **The Religious Worldview: Security and Stability**

The appeal and the charm that gurus have are enhanced by the role that religion plays in our lives. "Religion," Anson Shupe argues, "has become a rallying point for political activism worldwide because of its nonrelativistic nature. It is a motivational source for drawing on heroic

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importance of open-air Cremations. Also, the 68<sup>th</sup> Shankaracharya, Shri Chandrashekharendra, often met with Mahatma Gandhi and supported the latter's religio-political views. See Seshan.<sup>32</sup> Discussing religion and societies, Donald Eugene Smith writes that: "in traditional societies, religion is a mass phenomenon, politics is not; in transitional societies, religion can serve as the means by which the masses become politicized" (124).

myths for resisting oppression and reform. It offers the associational structures and collective opportunities for aggrieved persons to come together and establish consciousness-of-kind” (26). Hinduism, as the guru introduces it in the fictions I analyze, is the go-to for “aggrieved persons.” Gurus oversee marital functions, births, deaths and perform regular *pujas*.<sup>33</sup> However, for the believers, the guru is the ultimate religious leader. Although not God, the guru is omniscient and even omnipotent. The guru may be uneducated in some cases, but that does not stop the guru from knowing all there is to know. The disciples feel the guru’s presence even in his absence, either through pictures, texts or any other object that the guru has presented as a part of himself. The guru is the general physician, an older sibling, the parent a devotee never had, a therapist (psychological and sexual) and even a financial advisor.

While some gurus aim at the rural poor, others prefer disciples who are well off. The guru lays claim to divinity, symbolizes the traditional Hindu culture and trumps every personal memory or association that individuals may have with India and Hinduism. The guru can rewrite Hindu rituals, demarcate new boundaries and predict the future. The guru never calls for a real, physical return to India, but always pushes for a metaphorical return. Gurus have the right to govern congregations and countries because, as the masses believe, God has chosen them to do so. The guru becomes the only Hindu voice that is heard by all Hindu Indians across the diaspora. Thus, in these fictions, the guru often connects and unites scattered Indians and becomes a symbol of united power.

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<sup>33</sup> *Puja* is the Hindu way of worshipping. A *Puja* can involve elaborate and expensive rituals, or a few simple rites. *Pujas* can be performed with or without an officiating religious head. As Mearns writes: “the rites leading up to and following the sequence of events labeled *puja* and performed by an officiant of a priestly class (brahmin or pandaram) have a structure which can be simplified into the following pattern: preparation; invocation; contemplation; and blessing. For each of these stages, a further sequence of symbol-laden events occurs. Although the label *puja* is most often and easily applied to the third stage, as I have identified them, every *puja* required the other stages, whether they are in an elaborate form such as on the ‘special days’ in the Hindu calendar, or in a truncated form as on ordinary weekdays” (187).

Together with the emotional/spiritual support that gurus provide and the unity they promote, the adoption of a religious worldview also provides fixity and stability in a rapidly globalizing world.<sup>34</sup> As Catarina Kinnvall writes:

Globalization, modernity and the spread of capitalism have for many people resulted in the development of new forms of social alienation... The abstract character of public institutions, with their implicit anonymity, causes alienation and the pluralistic structures of modern society have made the lives of more and more individuals migratory, ever-changing and mobile as they get uprooted from their original social milieu. (25)

Such social alienation, I argue, is doubly amplified if one is not in one's country of birth, since Kinnvall's "original social milieu" is absent. Ironically then, Guruism (which can be a counter-tendency to globalization) is beneficial to some in the diaspora because it reinstates the protective framework of tradition and religion that modernity and globalization have stripped away.<sup>35</sup> However, the creation of the framework is not easy, since both the pre-colonial and the colonial gurus do not provide a model for such a structure.

Rather than be a helpless, undefined minority, diasporic (postcolonial) gurus may adopt the Oriental understanding of Hinduism. Gurus may act as mimics who fit into a Western stereotype, thus becoming a fetish for the charismatic East. All the gurus reviewed in this project claim religious exclusivity and retrieve Guruism as a tool for manipulation and mystification to carve a communal religiopolitical space in the diaspora. They represent cultural purity, traditional grandeur and then transcend into politics. Communities, who want protection not only at a philosophical level but also at a more practical, political level, elect these gurus. Thus, in

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<sup>34</sup> My understanding of the term "globalization" stems from McGrew's definition of it. I believe that globalization involves "worldwide financial, economic, technological and ecological interdependence," and cultural goods do not flow very differently from economic goods (qtd. in Cohen 155).

<sup>35</sup> Globalization homogenizes the world to some extent, but it also hurls people and ideas at each other with great speed. Not everyone can adopt or even warm up to "new" ideas and religions that they may encounter. This is primarily because these "new" ideas can challenge dominant, extant beliefs and therefore threaten the present as understood by some.

addition to religious/psychological authority, gurus also have political/social/cultural authority over their disciples.

In the fictions I examine, the disciples are usually either young people of Western origin looking to be grounded or old people of South Asian origin intimidated by their ever-changing diasporic identity. Both these groups of disciples need the guru to teach, comfort and guide them.<sup>36</sup> When the guru represents them politically they find their concerns and fears voiced publically for the first time. This is why Guruism cannot be seen as a purely negative construct. However, spiritual worldviews do not necessarily transition perfectly into political arenas. Individuals tend to hold onto known ground, and the crisis arises not from their stubborn adherence to their safety nets, but their insistence that others do away with theirs. The resolve to eradicate difference stems from the fear that different worldviews could challenge the supremacy of any one religion.

Religion thus has both the power to unite and to divide: “religion breaks through frontiers and in the same process throws up new frontiers because religions ancient and modern, monotheist, polytheist and totemic, with their apparatus of ritual practices and internal, proprietorial, self-sufficient codes, are demarcators and markers of difference rather than similarity and homogeneity” (Lehmann 300).<sup>37</sup> The fixity and stability that religion provides in today’s globalizing world can be discriminatory. In the case of gurus, for example, the disciples are always encouraged to distinguish themselves from the common man. The guru (his teachings and the texts he may write) is the center of any homogeneity or unity that may be conceived by those who follow him.

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<sup>36</sup> However, as I shall show, not all youths are immune to gurus. For example, the young, Western disciples of Desai’s guru in *Journey to Ithaca* are very attached to the Mother.

<sup>37</sup> Markets do not determine globalization; sometimes religion is the primary force.

Thus although religion, as David Lehmann claims, is the “original globalizer” it is distinctive from the model of globalization borrowed from global capitalism. Religious globalization constitutes both difference and homogeneity. Lehmann identifies two types of religious globalization: the cosmopolitan, comprising institutionalized religions spread out all over the world, interacting with local cultures; and the fundamentalist or the charismatic. This latter kind is “driven not by elites but by a mass of independent actors, who pick and choose elements from different cultures (modern and premodern) without regard to the constraints of a regulating, official religious hierarchy” (Lehmann 299). Fundamentalist/charismatic religious globalization tends to be more standardized than its cosmopolitan counterpart, and this homogeneity “is achieved more by reliance on common authoritative texts than on traditions or institutions” (Lehmann 305).

Guruism, in the novels I study, shares characteristics with fundamentalist forms of religious globalization, and like it “has the ability to jump over existing political, linguistic and ethnic frontiers and to create” transcultural communities of individuals without regard to these prior attachments” (Lehmann 306). But these Guruisms are also cosmopolitan, since the gurus try to blend local cultures with Hinduism.<sup>38</sup> Each of the Guruisms illustrated in these novels has the ability to “jump over” political frontiers by tackling and bridging linguistic and cultural differences, and by creating new political frontiers. This ability to connect with the “other” through religions thus can be a way of eradicating differences.

Religion and its pursuit reward the follower with fixity and stability in a globalized world. However, I argue that in the novels I examine the only way to achieve this fixity,

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<sup>38</sup> For instance, while Desai’s guru is able to create a transcultural community (her ashram welcomes people from all over the world, regardless of race or religion), other gurus do not always wish to cross ethnic lines. Their disciples are thus only Indians. However, as I shall show, these gurus too go beyond political and linguistic frontiers in their attempt to contact the “home.”

especially in the diasporas, is through mobility. Gurus address their disciples' primary need: the longing for a "home" that is fixed in time and place, and that still welcomes its long lost inhabitants.<sup>39</sup> Since gurus represent and recreate the Hindu culture, and contribute to creating notions of identity by becoming authority figures on the primal "home's" religion and culture, they are required to be in constant contact/communication with the "home." These gurus thus act as vehicles through which South Asians approach their origin.

Technology has changed the way religion is disseminated today. In the novels analyzed, religious actors, or gurus, are the primary force behind the global exchange of ideas, currency and people. Thus today, religion assists the global cultural flow. Religious ideas and images travel through religioscapes (or religious networks) at great speed and are being used to connect, communicate and interact over vast geographical spaces. All the four gurus discussed in this project employ religious networks/religoscapes.<sup>40</sup> These gurus restructure communities and teach (social/mental/political and even sexual) mobility/freedom through religion by embedding themselves within the South Asian imagination to assist the assimilation of themselves and their community into the host country. In the section that follows I introduce and define the term religioscapes, and I explain how gurus embed themselves within the South Asian imagination.

### **Guruism through Religioscapes and Mobility**

I begin with an analysis of Arjun Appadurai's model of global cultural flow. Appadurai suggests that imagination, the "key component of the new global order," is less abstract today because it "has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (both in the sense

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<sup>39</sup> This is different in South Asian texts. In for example R. K. Narayan's *The Guide*, the Indian guru and his disciples are not in search of an imaginary "home," for they are at the home. This guru does not meddle with politics either.

<sup>40</sup> The mobility offered is different in the four novels. Dabydeen and Naipaul's novels provide social and political mobility. Brata's novel introduces sexual mobility and Desai's guru concentrates on spiritual mobility.

of labor and of culturally organized practice) and a form of negotiation between sites of agency ('individuals') and globally defined fields of possibility" (30). Imagination helps to forge communities transnationally, and there are five dimensions to the creatively induced "global cultural flow"—"ethnoscapes," "mediascapes," "technoscapes," "financescapes" and "ideoscapes."<sup>41</sup> The suffix *-scape*, Appadurai asserts, "allows us to point to the fluid, irregular shapes of these landscapes," and indicates that "these are...deeply perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic, political situatedness of different sorts of actors" (31). Inserting a sixth dimension into Appadurai's model, I argue that the global cultural flow may also be explored through "religioscapes."

Religioscapes are the reservoirs of religious images in, for example, people's imaginations and memories, holy books, religious discourses, pamphlets and symbols, internet websites, the act of constructing temples, mosques, churches etc., communal praying, religious organizations that do social services. These images travel locally, nationally and transnationally, and religioscapes also constitute the world created/generated by such images (such as texts, temples, worship centers, even the mind of an individual). Religioscapes are populated by individuals, institutions, communities and even nations that express the self and imagine a reality for it based on the understanding that the self can be validated primarily through religion—not through the nation-state or any other political/social category. Religioscapes thus challenge conventional nation-state boundaries and borders and are not concerned with states or polities.

Religioscapes are both a destination and a means to the destination, both a location and a vehicle that transports an individual to that location. Religioscapes frequently involve transnational movements (oftentimes without any physical movement): through people who

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<sup>41</sup> These five landscapes "are the building blocks of...imagined worlds" (Appadurai 31). For a detailed definition of each of these dimensions see page 31 of Appadurai's essay.



carry a religious leader's teachings in the form of pamphlets, tape records, posters and so on to other countries; through the currency (electronic and otherwise) that is exchanged owing to donations to a religious leader or to the ashram, mosque, or church that the leader supports/builds; through religious centers that are set up worldwide to disseminate identical information, through movies, documentaries, interviews and other media which religious leaders use to broadcast their ideas to the general public); and through men of power (in politics or in business) who often patronize these religious leaders and their institutions.

Relioscapes are constructions, both tangible and intangible, that reflect our personal perspectives of religion and its role in culture. Relioscapes thus both help shape culture and are a product of it. In concluding his essay, Appadurai asks the question: "Can we speak of some of these flows as being, for *a priori* structural or historical reasons, always prior to and formative of other flows?" (45). Although not all ideas are religious, I suggest that every *-scape* can be converted into a relioscape. For example, each time CNN (mediascape) airs Osama Bin Laden's audiotapes the channel unwillingly becomes a *relioscape* that temporarily disseminates Bin Laden's ideas. Relioscapes have the power to affect other *-scapes* because, arguably, religion is becoming a more important identity marker today.<sup>42</sup>

In his delineation of *-scapes*, Appadurai insists that "the individual actor is the last locus of this perspectival set of landscapes, for these landscapes are eventually navigated by agents

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<sup>42</sup> Unlike other identity markers, religion is a multi-tasker. Most religions associate with one particular location so that even nomads can feel rooted. Religion provides a sense of history, especially if individuals believe that the history of their ancestors is deeply intertwined with theirs, and that their forefathers' suffering is synonymous to theirs and a community (usually, a group of worshippers who belong to the same religion, keep in touch). Most importantly, religion justifies our existence in this world. No other identity marker: age, sex, nationality, height, race etc. can do all of this all at once. In a world where culture and its symbols (for example, certain buildings), which both sustain our faith in ideas about ourselves and reassure us that we are important, are constantly changing, only religion and its explanation of life seems to be unwavering.

who both experience and constitute larger formations” (31). In my discussion of religioscapes, I would like to position the “individual actor” above the other actors that Appadurai lists (like nation-states and multinationals) because the construction of religioscapes is largely determined by individual actors. History has shown how individuals like Osama Bin Laden or even those who work for the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* in India, can make the world suffer in an attempt to get their perspectives across.<sup>43</sup> These people do not only “experience and constitute larger formations” because of the control they have over imaginations and the lives of millions around the world in the name of religion, but they also construct culture by playing with extant systems of belief. Through their use of religious symbols, religious leaders are able to assemble, control, and sustain religioscapes.

My concern in this dissertation is with the way in which Hindu religious leaders or gurus in South Asian Diasporic fictions are represented as constructing religioscapes. Naipaul and Dabydeen’s gurus construct and instruct the diasporic imaginary using only Hindu symbols/ideas/metaphors to cloak the “host” as the “home.”<sup>44</sup> Diasporas “centre on the idea of one’s ‘homeland’ as very real spaces *from which alone a certain level of redemption is possible*. Homeland is the *desh* (in Hindi) against which all the other lands are foreign, or *videsh*” (Mishra 2).<sup>45</sup> Since the *desh* is always understood against the *videsh*, and redemption is only possible through the *desh*, the importance of the *desh* is therefore crucial to the diaspora’s definition of itself.<sup>46</sup> The diasporic guru both constructs and instructs the aporetic space occupied by South

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<sup>43</sup> The RSS has often been cited as the modern source of militant Hinduism in India. See Omvedt.

<sup>44</sup> Mishra uses the terms “diasporic imaginary” to refer to: “any ethnic enclave in a nation-state that defines itself, consciously, unconsciously or through self-evident or implied political coercion, as a group that lives in displacement” (14).

<sup>45</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>46</sup> Mishra writes: “as a general rule – and the establishment of a Jewish homeland is the exception and not the rule – diasporas do not return to their homeland (real or imagined)” (2).

Asian diasporic individuals—which is neither *desh*, since that is always considered to be India, nor *videsh*, since the host country is actually the “current,” lived home and not a foreign land. Naipaul and Dabydeen’s gurus cloak the *videsh* as the *desh*.<sup>47</sup> Brata’s guru also cloaks the “host” as the “home,” as this makes his Guruism desirable. Desai’s guru (the Mother) is located at “home” (India), however, through her Guruism the Mother approaches the “home” that Desai thinks India should be. Although not complete, the control that these gurus have over the diasporic imaginary is still very strong.

Gurus in *The Mystic Masseur*, *The Wizard Swami*, *The Sensuous Guru* and *Journey to Ithaca* are primarily negotiators who, having understood the “burden of spiritual greatness” that Hinduism and India have borne, construct problematic religioscapes. Gurus, in these fictions, are architects who determine how the modern society conceives Hinduism, the function of Hindu religious institutions, and the role that Hinduism must play today. In the process, gurus radically revise their own roles within the “host” and the “home.” Religious symbols, thoughts and ideas are translated into powerful political beliefs as gurus strive to turn the spiritual burden into a boon. Through religioscapes variable concepts like identity and belonging are often constructed, reconstructed and even dismembered as need be. The “fields of possibility” that the religioscape of Guruism generates can be both positive and negative. Although the gurus in each of the fictions examined construct different religioscapes, their approach is similar: a religious/psychological/cultural authority is followed by a political control over the disciple.

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Diasporas may not actually return, although they still attempt to—at least to their imagined homeland—often through a recreation of the homeland within the diaspora.

<sup>47</sup> Mishra uses the terms “diasporic imaginary” to refer to: “any ethnic enclave in a nation-state that defines itself, consciously, unconsciously or through self-evident or implied political coercion, as a group that lives in displacement” (14).

While most religions have one official head who often crosses into the political realm, Hindu gurus have traditionally been seen as renunciators.<sup>48</sup> Hindu literary texts show that the guru has always made kings, but has never been one. The princes of popular literature, as in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, are guided by gurus who help them make political and personal decisions without actually assuming any gubernatorial power. The diasporic guru, however, wants to become king by controlling people's imaginations and the spaces people occupy. The space could be a nation (as in Naipaul, Dabydeen and Brata) or a place created by the guru (as in Desai). Gurus thus construct religioscapes that aid in controlling both the disciples' internal (the mind) and external (the political/social/cultural environment) spaces. Although each guru approaches the external environment differently, all of them seek some sort of political control since this allows them to be more active in the real world (the world that the disciple lives in) and not just in the spiritual world from which the value system of the disciple stems (which is more abstract and less concrete).

Importantly, "Religion affects politics at two levels: an individual or personal level, and a collective or institutional level. The second is the more visible of the two, being where religion can become a lobbying force" (Smith xi).<sup>49</sup> In the religioscapes that Guruism constructs, the individual or personal level increasingly collides and intertwines with the collective or institutional. Gurus use religious metaphors to express themselves politically. The gurus' sermons begin to sound like political campaigns and vice versa, and the disciples' political preference becomes coterminous with their religious identity. Voting for the guru is a sacred responsibility, and politics is a clarion call to faith. The guru's foray into politics is important

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<sup>48</sup> The Pope is an important religious figure, but he has complete gubernatorial power over the Vatican. Mohammed began as a prophet who spread his word by becoming the political leader of his people.

<sup>49</sup> Huston Smith. Introduction, *Spirit Matters*.

since it allows Hinduism to become a “lobbying force” around which all Hindus unite to be represented politically. Spiritual advancement becomes synonymous with political progression. In return, the guru offers spiritual and political protection, acceptance both into the congregation and in the diaspora, and a new, empowered, and collective identity. To this extent, the juxtaposition of religion and politics indicates the diaspora’s willingness to participate in the politics of the host country.

Political leaders like M.K. Gandhi have already conceptualized the marriage between Hinduism and politics; the task of the diasporic guru therefore is not very difficult. Almost all the gurus I examine read Gandhi at one point or another, refer to him in their speeches, study his writings and expound his philosophies. Some even try to contact him.<sup>50</sup> Gandhi, arguably, poses as the father of the diasporic guru. Gandhi preached secularism, but he also described India in Hindu religious terms. As with Gandhi, Dabydeen and Naipaul’s gurus shape their political beliefs, ideas and visions through their understanding of religion. They preach a new Hindu diaspora, where no other ethnicity or religion is present. Brata and Desai’s gurus, however, propose an identity that is comfortable with and finds power through difference.

Unlike precolonial and colonial gurus, diasporic gurus, whatever their motive, have not taken to spirituality for purely religious reasons. In contrast to colonial gurus, they not only appear to be in complete control of the spiritual realm, but they also have, or at least believe they have, the power to affect serious changes in political affairs. In these fictions, gurus do not see the profession of a guru as only a spiritual calling. Thus gurus who practice Guruism are usually political activists/leaders in spiritual garb. The marketability of Guruism, together with the

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<sup>50</sup> They seem to conduct their lives to the tune of Gandhi’s. There have been many movies made about Gandhi that convey his political role in either a positive and negative light, but I believe *Gandhi, My Father* is the only movie that focuses on Gandhi as a failed parent. Naipaul’s Ganesh and Dabydeen’s Swami Devan do not get along with their sons.

money from communal support and political power it brings, often makes it a very attractive and a popular “trade.”<sup>51</sup> Gurus are often powerful because their disciples endeavor to represent the “self” through the authoritative figure of the guru in order to fight the tensions arising from displacement, memories, lack of a political voice, eroding old world views, and demands of the “new” life that the diaspora entails.

The power structure within the guru’s world is similar to those constructed in New Religious Movements (NRMs).<sup>52</sup> Like NRMs, male charismatic leaders generally head Guruism, although there are a few female leaders. The “leadership structures of some NRMs are described as pyramidal, with the leader at the peak, lower leadership ranks arranged in descending levels and the base formed by grass-roots members” (Arweck 270). The guru too is always at the peak, although sometimes those who sponsor his Guruism may closely accompany him. Thus while in NRMs individuals “surrender to the will of the leader,” gurus may occasionally have to listen to “lower leadership” (Arweck 270). For example, Dabydeen’s guru is well respected throughout Guyana, but he must work under the businessman Bhairam Bhuraji who makes all the major decisions. The concept of surrendering to the will of a leader makes political parties formed by gurus practicing Guruism different from their regular political counterparts.

Like other NRMs, gurus set up their religiopolitical congregation as one family unit. Life in a communal setting is encouraged. There are certain texts and documents that everyone follows and a specific lifestyle that the community is required to maintain. The mobility that the

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<sup>51</sup> In his novel, Naipaul highlights the fact that great many youth turn to this profession.

<sup>52</sup> Defining NRMs Arweck writes that NRMs: “comprises a wide range of groups and movements of alternative spirituality, the emergence of which is generally associated with the aftermath of the 1960s counter-cultural...NRMs...have formed since the Second World War and came to prominence in North America and Western Europe” (269). Although not concentrated in North America and Western Europe, Guruism, I argue, is alternative spirituality that teaches the “spiritually conscious” to be politically active as well and is born in South Asian diasporas not of the 1960s counter-culture movements, but from the need for political security—even though the ideals it often establishes are undesirable.

guru offers thus has its limitations. The guru has the power to change both the texts and the lifestyles when and if the need arises. Thus Naipaul's guru writes his own book on Hinduism. Dabydeen's guru religiously follows Hindu texts, and Brata's guru is not interested in what Hindu texts have to offer. Desai's guru maintains complete control of her ashram and its inmates. She decides what time her disciples wake up and what they eat on a daily basis. Desai's the Mother, the only female guru in the fictions I have examined, does not practice Guruism very differently from her male counterparts. Although Guruism does not necessarily grant the female guru a privileged position it nevertheless bestows her with an elite status that merits respect, authority and power—as will be seen in my study of Desai's *Journey to Ithaca*.

However, “Regarding the role of women, NRMs have, on the one hand, challenged mainstream society in terms of sexual-gender arrangements, while on the other hand reinforcing the traditional patterns of gender roles” (Arweck 272). The different Guruisms depicted in the fictions I examine have varying sexual-gender arrangements, but women are sometimes assigned roles. If the guru is a man, for example, his wife is expected to cook meals at congregation gatherings. Gurus are traditionally considered male, but the role has become more inclusive and the Desai chapter reveals the fluidity that constitutes Guruism today. Gurus can be from any religion and from any sex, although we are yet to encounter a South Asian female guru.<sup>53</sup>

### **The Problems with Diasporic Guruism**

Apart from the somewhat hindered mobility that gurus introduce, there are other problems that their disciples face. Guruism, I argue, has the power to inhibit successful diasporization or diasporic assimilation. Diasporic Guruism redefines the guru and his community as primarily Hindu and Indian, but it often underplays their diasporic identity. However, as I shall show, for the youth in Dabydeen and Naipaul's fictions diasporization seems

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<sup>53</sup> As I shall discuss later, Desai's guru is not of South Asian origin.

to be the most logical approach to affirming an identity for the uprooted self. In these fictions, when gurus call for ethical/religious purity, they risk segregation from their own youth who are the future. This is one of the reasons why Guruism sometimes fails. For those who wish to assimilate with the diaspora, the guru is an unwelcome figure.

The disciples of the guru refuse to see other truths, and are even happy to lay down their lives to protect their gurus and their faith. The guru's gaze may be that of an Orientalist (as in the case of Desai), but in successive chapters I explore how their efforts sometimes stem from a genuine need to express their minority standpoint/voice. The paradox of diasporic Guruism is that while the desire to assimilate forces these individuals into Guruism the adoption of a regressive Orientalist view only coerces them to embrace an imagined primal "home"—thereby risking cultural fixity and particularism—of which they have only a vague idea.

Gurus obtain and secure their authoritative role through various controversial mechanisms. Guruism can entail brainwashing, teaching religious texts with the guru's spin on them, interpreting the present through religious texts and instructing the disciple to act accordingly, locating current political strife in religious history, re-establishing and strengthening ties with India (by setting up communication with current political leaders in India, by readopting Indian food habits, opening/funding schools that teach Hindu religious texts, etc.), reading books authored by famous political figures in India, adopting multiple roles (gurus are often doctors and can apparently cure not only damaged faiths, but also broken bones), reinstating casteism (since most of the gurus are Brahmins they often remind their disciples of the Hindu caste hierarchy and once casteism is instituted in the diasporas it becomes easy for these gurus to obtain access to religious/social duties that traditionally only Brahmins can perform), adopting penmanship and writing treatises on religion (these are often either copies of



extant Hindu religious texts or the guru's thoughts on Hinduism and God) and holding people accountable to often imaginary ideals/standards of Hinduism.

In the newer South Asian diasporas, especially in America, as Brata's novel portrays, the guru attracts large numbers of both South Asians and non-South Asians to yoga classes. At these classes, yoga is often given a very spiritual twist and is reclaimed as a South Asian religious/spiritual practice. Since it is established thus in the diasporic imagination, yoga is often used as a way of showing off great discipline instead of physical prowess. Brata's guru does not have any real knowledge of yoga and has never practiced it before, but he claims to have become a yogi. However, as Feuerstein suggests, the "traditional role of the guru, or spiritual teacher, is not widely understood...even by those professing to practice Yoga or some other Eastern tradition entailing discipleship" (127). Yet yoga is a way to gain "discipleship," and Brata's guru is successful as a yogi.

The "knowledge" that Dabydeen's guru gains from reading ancient Hindu texts like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* grants him an alternate way to see his own identity, and he is able to show his disciples the advantages of practicing religion as a community. But, as I shall show, the guru's interpretation and the source of the guru's "knowledge" are often debatable and the effect they have on their disciples is sometimes suspect. Kramer and Alstad write that "the worldviews of all the planet's civilizations have been authoritarian, presenting 'truth,' especially moral truth, as essentially unchallengeable. This aims at bringing moral certainty, which in turn justifies control. A primary function of moral certainty is that it gives one (or the group as a whole) the right to tell people what to do" (4). As I shall show, the gurus' power over their disciples can rob them of the mobility/freedom that is introduced through the channels created to connect with the "home" or to obtain social/political freedom within the host society. Gurus have

the right to instruct, and their authority remains unchallenged because they claim to disseminate only that information which is already present in holy texts/scriptures and which is therefore considered absolute truth. While some of the gurus acquire this alleged knowledge from dubious sources, others willfully misinterpret sacred scriptures.

Thus, although the past, through a return to Hinduism and the history of the “home,” is revisited, remembered and (re)constructed by the gurus, it is not critically interrogated in order to understand the present. Wherever the guru fails to conduct this interrogation, the narrative resorts to either a mere reification of the prejudices of the colonizers or half-hearted, failed attempts at mimicking the “home.” This failure to interrogate refuses the (dis)located and recreated diaspora guru an identity of its own—an identity trying to come to an understanding of itself by reconciling its dual origins. As Derek Walcott writes, “the bitterness of the colonial experience, its degradations of dependency and its cynicism of older “values” tempts the Third World with spiritual alternatives” (258). In the fictions I examine, the search for the “spiritual alternative,” is fuelled by an absence of power that pulls the diasporic individual to a notion of “home.”<sup>54</sup> Although it is liberating to an extent, the sheer pressure of finding an alternative that works also consumes the guru.

Like Naipaul’s *The Mystic Masseur* and Brata’s *The Sensuous Guru*, Dabydeen’s *The Wizard Swami* follows a pattern. First there is a rejection of/lack of knowledge about Hinduism, followed by failed attempts to assimilate thoroughly into the host society, either because of foreign ancestry or because of some personal ‘shortcomings’ and finally adoption/appropriation of Hinduism and India. Failure to adopt leads to a sense of place-lessness. While Naipaul’s guru chooses to escape when his Guruism fails and Brata’s guru is murdered, Dabydeen’s guru is only

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<sup>54</sup> However artificially constructed, this notion is frequently inaccessible, sometimes owing to migration and stereotyping; and sometimes owing to the erasure of a memory of a “home” due to the experience of colonialism.

flustered. Yet instead of trying to repeat history and maintaining colonialist stereotypes, the gurus have tried to use the powerful idea of Guruism to actively participate in the diasporas of which they are an undeniable part.

In *The Deeper Dimension of Yoga: Theory and Practice* Feuerstein suggests that: “Spiritual teachers...are not interested in acquiring and accumulating material...They are not even about morality. Typically, their message...[is] asking that...we overcome our intellectual blindness...and...realize the deepest core of human nature, the Spirit” (129-130). The postcolonial guru, unlike Feuerstein’s traditional guru, is not wholly uninterested in material wealth, and although the guru is able to help eager disciples, sometimes he is not able to do much for himself because he is steeped in “intellectual blindness.” Dabydeen’s guru is dyslexic and often sees houses floating away. Brata’s guru loves to count the dollar notes that his young disciples place in front of him. In spite of all her efforts, the Mother’s disciple Matteo is as blind as when he came into the ashram. Naipaul’s guru, of course, is never able to face the realities of his own diasporic life and ultimately runs away to England having changed his name to G. Ramsay Muir.

However, most of the gurus in these fictions, to some extent, are able to teach their disciples to see themselves as they are—i.e. often caught between two opposing worldviews. Desai’s guru (the Mother) is even able to create a pluralistic/hybrid world where religion does not discriminate and people from different races and nationalities co-exist. The Mother enables a dialogue between many Worlds—and not solely through a Western lexicon and vocabulary—and allows for a responsible, non-hierarchical conversation between these Worlds.<sup>55</sup> Though sometimes, as I shall show, this partial visibility is a trap since the new-invented self can be

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<sup>55</sup> In *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* Rey Chow correctly suggests that postcolonialism needs to concentrate on the epistemological implications of the term “diaspora” (142).

cloaked in colonialist ideas of the East: one that sees it as only spiritual and religious, an affirmative Orientalist stereotype. Dabydeen's guru, for example, fails to initiate the conversation, finds himself inevitably the victim of the legacy of colonialism and is unable to be a true leader. The gurus in these fictions, I argue, suffer from a partial amnesia—one that is more pronounced for gurus who fail to create a pluralistic world view—where the subject adopting the idea of Guruism forgets his displacement and tries to yoke himself to his imagined “home” in order to invent the self anew. However, this has its advantages. Even after the guru leaves, the profitable networks that the guru had established continue to remain.

In these fictions all the gurus are authoritarian, and they remind people about the various constituents of their culture; punish/ostracize those who transgress; and make value judgments on people based on their relationship with the constituents. They monopolize culture and then dispense it in a way they deem right. This is primarily why gurus are seen as a negative influence on the society. Kramer and Alstad write that: “the traditional, often hidden authoritarian modes of transmitting and protecting information are leading humanity toward its own demise. We view the degree to which a culture is authoritarian as a barometer of its dysfunctionality” (4). I argue that some modes of authoritarian power, like Guruism, may be both functional and dysfunctional. Every culture has its own “library” of ideas that is well maintained by its “librarians”: i.e. mothers, elders, religious leaders and even books. In some cases, especially in diasporas, these librarians are the only custodians of their culture's past, present and future. Not surprisingly then, such custodians are often authority figures. In the fictions I analyze the guru's authority is often beneficial, however, it also creates problems for the guru. For example, the power to instruct others that Dabydeen's Devan obtains through Guruism creates a false sense of

superiority in him.<sup>56</sup> He successfully communicates his Hindu philosophy to his disciples, but he does not think about understanding himself through these philosophies—although he initially adopts Guruism to do so.

There is one main difficulty I have encountered in my project and this regards the term Hinduism. In the texts I examine, gurus are shown reading conventional Hindu texts, but the readers never know exactly which sect of Hinduism they are practicing. It is never clear whether the guru is from, for example, a Shaivite or a Vaishnavite background. While this may be a strategic move by the guru to attract all sects of Hinduism since greater support means greater power, I suggest that diasporic Hinduism is more homogenized than its South Asian counterpart. Both good and bad can come of this. With Guyana, for instance, casteism is forgotten and this is a welcome change. However, lumping all Hindus as one gives a false sense of unity that is misleading.

In the chapters that follow I examine both the promise and the disappointment that is Guruism. Every chapter analyzes why and how Guruism is constructed and focuses on the religioscapes that the gurus create.<sup>57</sup> Examining these novels through the religioscapes illustrates how ideas and people circulate in today's society, and how identity and belonging can be negotiated through religion. In each of the chapters I show how the fictional world is related to real time occurrences in these diasporas in order to underscore the importance and effects of partially fundamentalist religious movements like Guruism. While critics like Donald E. Smith suggest that "religious resurgence is a cyclical phenomenon," social scientists like Shupe see this

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<sup>56</sup> He thinks he is above them, but he is similar them. He grew up amongst them and religion was not on his agenda.

<sup>57</sup> Each novel presents us with a different guru, whose Guruism determines the way in which he constructs a Hindu religioscape. The various constructions of religioscapes show that religioscapes do not have to be created in the same way. A guru's construction of a religioscape, I argue, depends on the role he wants religion to play in the society.

resurgence as a more permanent threat that is increasingly evident in the industrialized west particularly.<sup>58</sup> This is not just true of the West, but of the whole world: fundamentalism does not have a specific location.

## Chapter Summaries

### Chapter One

In “Resisting Assimilation Trauma through ‘The Business (Man) of God’ in V. S. Naipaul’s *The Mystic Masseur*” I focus on the second generation of the indentured Indians in Trinidad and argue that, while the first generation of Indentured Indians deal primarily with the actual act of dislocation, their children face a different kind of trauma—that of assimilation and identity formation within the host society. The Indian customs, rituals and religion are traumatizing, and Ganesh lives out his trauma by creating fictions. Forced to constantly hide his Indian self, Ganesh makes his trauma speakable through Guruism, which proves to be therapeutic. From a confused nobody, Ganesh becomes a socially/politically powerful figure and the core of the Indo-Trinidadian community.

Ganesh’s religioscape penetrates the media (through the books he writes and advertises, and the taxi posters), the visual/architectural landscape (through the temple he builds) and the political arena. The incorporation of advertisement and politics into his local religioscape transforms it into a global one as Ganesh reaches out to India. The Indo-Trinidadians find a location for themselves within the diaspora (through Ganesh’s newly created culture of worship and politics), simultaneously feeling less “exiled,” as they lay a more concrete claim to their Indian heritage to gain a stronger sense of self. However, while Ganesh’s Guruism helps him

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<sup>58</sup> See Smith, page 34. Critics like Sahliyah believes that “Ideas about the separation of religion from politics were based upon the observation of the Western experience, which suggested that the process of secularization would not only persist, but would also be irreversible in an increasingly industrialized world” (3). Although those like Sahliyah argue otherwise, I side with Shupe: “Religiosity is on the ascent in the industrialized West, not the reverse” (20).

find his Indian voice in Trinidad, it also takes him away from the Trinidadian natives. His attempts to re-imagine his identity through the guru figure come to a halt when he perceives the shortcomings of a state under colonial power. The result is not only a rejection of the motherland (India), but also of the diaspora that does not allow the assimilation of the borrowed identity from the motherland, forcing Ganesh to return to the colonizer for faith and a new identity—a return to Englishness that he did not desire at the start of the novel.

## Chapter Two

“In search of a Doped ‘Destiny’: Hinduism & Guyana in Cyril Dabydeen’s *The Wizard Swami*” concentrates on guru Devan Chattergoon, who tries to construct the national identity of Guyana—and not only of Guyanese Indians—on the basis of religion. The reflexive relationship that Devan forms with his utopia (in this case India) is forged through the medium of religion with the help of imagination. Hinduism is a religious and social institution that is not just bringing Devan closer to his “homeland,” but that it is also his anchor, the sole means of carving a niche for himself in a multiracial society. However, Devan’s inability to reform his views in the urban capital of Guyana, Georgetown and the subsequent tensions that follow steer the Guyanese Hindus (especially the urban population) into thinking about their old identity, which is grounded in Indian history, religion, culture etc., in relation to their future identity.<sup>59</sup> A new Guyana begins to emerge, one that not only rejects the Indian self, but also learns to politically situate itself in Guyana and find strength in a new identity. To successfully hold onto Hindu traditions, Devan must learn to assimilate and accept other races and religions that also make up Guyana—only then will the urban Hindus and non-Hindus unanimously accept him as Swami Devan. *The Wizard Swami* points to a divide in the way in which the South Asian diaspora in Guyana

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<sup>59</sup> My reading differs from critics like Kean Gibson who blame Hindus for all religious strife in Guyana.

perceives Hinduism and the guru and to the fact that not all South Asian diasporas look to Hinduism and holy men for a guide to living.

### Chapter Three

“Marketing a Sexual Spirituality: Guruism in Sasthi Brata’s *The Sensuous Guru: The Making of a Mystic President*” begins by analyzing gurus in the American imagination.<sup>60</sup> While Dabydeen and Naipaul’s gurus suffer the consequences of a somewhat unwilling exile from the motherland (India), Brata’s guru, Ram Chakravarti, migrates from India to America with a desire to separate himself from the motherland since he envisions a future for himself in America. I suggest that the legacy of gurus in America is both a boon and a curse to Chukker. The aspiring writer, Chukker, is only interesting to the American public when he uses Guruism as a publicity stunt to draw attention to his writing. Ram capitalizes on an increasing obsession with oriental mysticism by retrieving Guruism as a tool for manipulation and mystification to allow a redefinition of himself within the American community. He forms the Universal Mystic Party, wins the Nobel Peace Prize when he is able to stop murderous riots in New York and ultimately becomes the president of the United States. Guruism is not an identity marker here, but rather a dollar minting machine and equivalent to the Green Card as it grants the permission to stay and use American resources to make money. Chukker introduces Tantric elements in his Guruism to “cure” his sexually frustrated disciples. The guru grants sexual and spiritual mobility and remedies the lives of his disciples through sex therapy. In this new South Asian diaspora, unlike the older counterparts, Guruism is not the means to a stable identity, but it is a marketable spirituality that is profitable.

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<sup>60</sup> While there are Hollywood movies such as *The Love Guru* (2008) and *The Guru* (2002) that ridicule gurus, the spirituality that gurus offer and their often blind disciples there are also more “serious” movies like *Eat, Pray, Love* (2010) that depict India and gurus as the ultimate destination of every spiritually inclined person.



## Chapter Four

In the first three chapters we witness gurus struggling to create perfect religioscapes, but in this last chapter we are introduced to a more successful, complete religiouscape. “Eternal Religion & The Mother in Anita Desai’s *Journey to Ithaca*” examines a South Asian diasporic writer’s perception of the guru figure. Laila, or “the Mother,” as all her disciples address her, is half Egyptian and half French—a Muslim dancer whose quest for spirituality leads her to India. In the age of globalization, anyone can become a guru as long as they are able to teach their disciples to transcend whatever limits their identity and society place on them. Desai’s guru constructs her religiouscape not through secular religion, but through “eternal” religion. The Mother preaches a way of life that closely identifies with Hinduism. Although her quest stems from reading Orientalist books on India, the Mother urges a more pluralistic world vision, encourages spiritual homogenization and facilitates the necessary and inevitable dialogue between Worlds by setting up an ashram (that functions much like an individual state and she is the only guru who seems to have translated her religious views smoothly into politics) in India that attracts a large number of followers, both international and domestic, mainly from the younger generations.

### **Conclusion: Major/Minor Themes**

A major theme in my study of Guruism in Naipaul and Dabydeen’s novels is assimilation. Assimilation, as is usually understood, is relatively easier for second and third generation immigrants than for the first. My analysis, however, reveals that this is not always the case. While it is easier for first generation immigrants to hold onto their Hindu identities by constantly reminding themselves of the “home” they once knew, their children who are born in the diaspora do not have this “advantage.” Their parents push them to remember the “home” through various mechanisms, while the diaspora coaxes them to forget. The conflicts that arise

not only determine the diaspora's future, but also show which influence has made a greater impact on the children and why.

I have also focused on the absence and presence of sacred spaces, like temples for instance, that provide a place for Hindus to practice their faith. Such centers, especially in diasporas, can sometimes be the only way for people of a common faith and history to meet each other. Dabydeen's guru, for instance, quickly becomes popular because of the support he lends to social institutions (that also act as religious centers) like schools. Understandably, the visible presence of minority religion is important because it indicates social acceptance.<sup>61</sup> Attention has also been given to the specific role that each guru plays in his society, the relationships that a community forms with the guru, government policies towards minorities and to the place of women in diasporic Guruism.<sup>62</sup> The themes explored vary with each chapter. Although my main concern is with fiction, I have used historical facts to contextualize each novel, and this I believe has made my analysis more thorough and complete.

Guruism is a new paradigm in modern Hinduism that combines traditional with personal views, thus birthing a belief system that is both orthodox and personal. By catering to individual clients, either to heal them or to teach them the guru's philosophies, Guruism, as I suggested before, takes institutional Hinduism to the streets. In the chapters that follow, as the plots of the fictions present different Guruisms, I investigate certain fundamental questions. How do individuals and communities negotiate their identity through the guru? Do gurus encourage

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<sup>61</sup> As I write this, I am thinking of the mosque controversy in New York. Places of worship cannot be constructed everywhere. Its social location (both in terms of its place in people's minds and the actual geographic location) is of utmost importance.

<sup>62</sup> I am interested in investigating whether guru-wives or *guru-ma* have as much cultural/religious authorities as do their husbands, and I examine this in the chapters on *The Mystic Masseur* and *The Wizard Swami*.

spirituality, or are they adopting only the conventional Hindu traditions?<sup>63</sup> How are religioscapes constructed? What information is exchanged over the religioscapes? Though religious intolerance is not a new phenomenon, religions today are more likely to confront and clash than ever before because there is so much information about them circulating through religioscapes, sometimes at incredible speed, for example, through the internet. Religioscapes are birthing sacral centers in pockets, and each one of these can give rise to intolerance and thus be potentially dangerous. We should, therefore, pay attention to how religious leaders disseminate religion all over the world and also decide how important authoritarian figures are to the functioning of the society. Can Guruism be justified if it is interpreted as an act of resisting diasporization? Do gurus need to incorporate local ideas, people and culture in their vision of tomorrow? Would this inclusion strengthen or dilute their ideas?

There is a difference between taking up religion for its own sake and mobilizing it for material/social/political gain, although it is often hard, and sometimes almost impossible, to distinguish between motives. Out of all the gurus examined, Guruism in Desai's novel seems to be the most powerful. She blends difference, yet her authority remains. However, is it even possible to subtract "authority" from Guruism? Will that not bring about an end to Guruism itself? It may be argued that the Mother's disciples live in harmony with difference only because she coerces them to. If the disciple is helpless without the guru (as the Mother's disciple Matteo becomes), does Guruism empower the disciple, although it sets out with that claim? Should Guruism be completely done away with? Can Hinduism survive the eradication of the guru?

Even though it does not have violent outcomes like Osama Bin Laden or Jim Jones's fundamentalism, Guruism is powerful because charismatic leaders have the power to make their

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<sup>63</sup> Heelas defines religion "in terms of obedience to a transcendent God and tradition which mediates his authority" and "*spirituality* as experience of the divine as immanent in life. Whilst the former is under threat...the latter is thriving" (358).

followers do almost anything. The misuse of limited knowledge, the psychological tricks and the ability to play with the weaknesses of their congregations mark such gurus as players who sometimes abuse their role as gurus. The danger lies in their apparently harmless fabrications of Hinduism, for a guru's charisma has the power to sway thousands. In his comic documentary *Religulous*, Bill Maher calls religion a "neurological disorder." Whether or not religion is a disease of the brain, one thing is clear: religions and religioscapes (i.e. the way they are channelized through society by the religious leaders) can have dangerous endings.

While prophets/religious leaders and descendants of other religions have sometimes spread their religion by the sword, Hindu godmen and godwomen have depended on more subtle methods.<sup>64</sup> However, the goals of all these prophets, leaders and godhumans have been the same. They convince people that they are nothing without the power of God and that this God has chosen prophets/godmen to dispense of His wisdom, the rest need only follow and obey. These prophets and godmen could simply be suffering from a neurological disorder or, as I believe, some know what they are doing because of the benefits that their assumed holiness reaps.

Prophets and godmen are enormously powerful primarily because they are supported by people who have faith in them. These disciples will do anything to protect the gurus and their ideas. Part of the charisma that gurus have is what we, the believing, faithful disciples, have lent them. We believe in a guru's powers and virtues because we want to. Our want stems from our most basic need: someone has to be the martyr to prove that God and everything to do with God actually exists. We need religious leaders to bear witness to this and thus renew our faith in man's nobility and purpose in life. Keeping in mind both the rise of fundamentalism and the increased use of religion as identity marker, this dissertation intervenes in postcolonial studies by

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<sup>64</sup> There is no prophet in Hinduism. The major religious icons are all considered gods and goddesses.

providing a theoretical framework with which critics can study postcolonial constructions of Hinduism, many of which tend to be Orientalist in nature, thus enhancing our understanding of Hinduism and today's world.

**CHAPTER 2**  
**RESISTING ASSIMILATION TRAUMA THROUGH “THE BUSINESS (MAN) OF  
GOD” IN V. S. NAIPAUL’S *THE MYSTIC MASSEUR***

“One man’s imagined community is another man’s political prison.”<sup>65</sup>

Critics like Harveen Sachdeva Mann and M. K. Naik have written about the use of irony and satire, the politics of nationhood and identity, and V. S. Naipaul’s delineation of the harmful effects of mimicry in *The Mystic Masseur* (1957).<sup>66</sup> Others, like Aaron Eastley, have appropriately commented on Naipaul’s overly critical attitude towards the East Indians of Trinidad.<sup>67</sup> Such readings of the novel, however, do not examine Naipaul’s use of Hindu rituals and traditions. Interrogating protagonist Ganesh Ramsumair’s infamous comical absurdity, this chapter focuses on his traumatic childhood, his subsequent adoption of Hindu sacraments, and his efforts to create a homogenous Hindu identity in Trinidad. Ganesh’s Guruism, I argue, is a

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<sup>65</sup> Appadurai. “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy.”

<sup>66</sup> Mann has pointed out that Naipaul’s first three novels—*Miguel Street* (1955/1959), *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), and *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958)—are about “the theme of role-playing, or what he [Naipaul] terms ‘mimicry,’ a motif that attains perfection in *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), *The Mimic Men* (1967), and *A Bend in the River* (1979)” (Mann 467). It is “his second work, *The Mystic Masseur*, the story of Ganesh, failed schoolteacher-turned-mystic, that best exemplifies Naipaul’s early critical stance on mimicry as a theme” (Mann 469). For Mann, this novel illustrates Naipaul’s understanding of imposture that is “an activity indulged in for practical, material gain,” and not “as a means of “survival, inevitable and amoral” (469). I suggest that imposture in this novel is a means of survival. See also Naik’s “Irony as Stance and as Vision: A Comparative Study of V.S. Naipaul’s *The Mystic Masseur* and R.K. Narayan’s *The Guide*.”

<sup>67</sup> See Eastley’s “Joking with the Centre: Naipaul’s Ambiguous Treatment of Trinidadian English in *The Mystic Masseur*.” Naipaul is Abdul JanMohamed’s and Aaron Eastley’s “seduced ‘native’ writer” because he betrays his people and maintains “the superior moral and social status of colonizers” with “on-going assertions of native depravity” (*Joking with the Centre* 26). Analyzing Naipaul’s use of the Trinidadian dialect in *The Mystic Masseur*, Eastley suggests “the fetishization of the Other involved crafting the malleable medium of local language to project ignorance and ludicrousness onto his characters” (*Joking with the Centre* 26). Eastley analyzes language as a “characterization tool and a source of humor” (*Ibid* 38).

self-defense mechanism. His trauma and trials, however amusing or ludicrous, determine both the structure and the function of the religious network he creates to support his role as a guru.

I begin with a brief outline of the chapter. In Naipaul's (colonial) Trinidad, the position of indentured Indians is mostly dependent on the larger, colonial economic structure within which they must fit.<sup>68</sup> The performance of Hindu rituals allows the Indian community some freedom within this structure to practice their ethnic identity. Yet the repeated enactments, I argue, often adversely affect the second generation Indo-Trinidadians in this novel. As a child, Ganesh fails to bond with his community primarily because he is unable to understand the rituals and their function in his life. Ironically, however, to deal with the trauma of performing Hinduism, he embraces the tradition that disturbed him in the first place.

Ganesh's Guruism, however, focuses on empowering the community, and he is different from the priests and pundits in Trinidad.<sup>69</sup> While the older plantation-Indian diaspora "lives out its trauma through a constant return to an original moment that is in the habit of re-wounding the subject" ("Traumatic Memory" 107), Ganesh, I argue, "lives out" his trauma by continually fabricating stories about himself and his religion.<sup>70</sup> Suggesting that Ganesh's adoption of Guruism later is an extension of this habit to fabricate, I identify the processes through which he

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<sup>68</sup> While the Indians in the subcontinent fought for freedom from the British, the Indo-Trinidadians struggle for an identity independent of Britain and India.

<sup>69</sup> In the pages that follow, I shall examine the differences to show why the guru was essential to his community.

<sup>70</sup> Mishra suggests further that: "It is as if the moment itself has the 'unspeakable' feature of trauma and can be glimpsed only through its re-inscription in a narrative of departure and loss" (107). In fact "what Freud saw as the essentially unstable nature of traumatic memory (because of the role of the unconscious) finds its fullest expression in the body of fiction where the very nature of art (as dream work) reworks precisely a memory that remains unstable" (Mishra 113). Ganesh's transition into the Anglicized "G. Ramsay Muir" is sudden and happens without any real explanations. The transition is recorded in only a page, and we meet Mr. Muir suddenly. The novel's structure is challenged and the usual length of the chapter is compromised.

becomes a guru and draw attention to the religious network that he subsequently builds to support his newly assumed religious role.

This chapter is divided into four sections. “Traumatic Beginnings” foregrounds specific Hindu rituals, not Ganesh’s Guruism, and is devoted to a close analysis of Ganesh’s life before he becomes a guru. Ganesh’s traumas, often overlooked by critics of *The Mystic Masseur*, fuel his need for an alternative spiritual model and are therefore crucial in comprehending his Guruism. In the second section, “Understanding the Sacred,” I focus on Ganesh’s adoption of Hinduism. By assuming the role of a guru, Ganesh ensures that the new spiritual community is made according to his wishes. Owing to his newly acquired religious authority, the construction of this community is easily accomplished.

In the third section, “The Business Man of God,” I investigate the religioscape (the vehicle of his Guruism) that Ganesh creates through the books he writes, the media (through the newspaper he publishes and the advertisements about his healing powers), and business policies designed specifically for his disciples. Section four, “Politicizing Hinduism,” examines Ganesh’s approach to politics and his rise to MBE. Even though the authenticity of Ganesh’s Guruism may be questioned, the religioscape proves to be a boon since it brings the Indo-Trinidadians closer. More importantly, it strengthens the community’s economical, social and political presence in Trinidad. Instead of fitting into a colonial structure, the Indo-Trinidadians begin to establish their own social, cultural and financial institutions that lend them some power.<sup>71</sup>

### **Traumatic Beginnings**

In the introduction to *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, Vijay Mishra locates Indian/South Asian diasporic trauma not within the “the abstract loss of the homeland” but

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<sup>71</sup> With Ganesh’s financial successes, his community begins to do well. Ganesh, unlike Chukker in Brata’s *The Sensuous Guru*, does not keep all the wealth to himself.



within “the case of the plantation-Indian diaspora, in the space of ships, the passage, the barracks” (12).<sup>72</sup> Using Mishra’s understanding of trauma in the South Asian diaspora, I focus on the second generation of Indo-Trinidadians in *The Mystic Masseur*. I argue, that while the first generation of Indentured Indians in the novel deal primarily with, as Mishra points out, the actual act of dislocation, their children face a different kind of trauma. Ganesh’s trauma, unlike his father’s, does not arise from the memories of India or from the painful journey from India to Trinidad. Ganesh suffers because of his attempts to assimilate within the host society, while also holding onto his Indian culture.

As Martin Baumann writes: “in the beginning of living in the host country the preservation of one’s religious-cultural tradition has not been recognised as a main problem, as soon as the second generation has to be brought up, this issue comes to the foreground” (24).<sup>73</sup> This “issue” is particularly complicated in Naipaul’s novel. Unlike the other chapters in this project, “Resisting Assimilation Trauma through ‘The Business (Man) of God’” introduces a religioscape created amidst a three-pronged conflict between the parent, the colonizer and the host country.<sup>74</sup> *The Mystic Masseur* is set in British Trinidad and the colonizer is actively present.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Trauma may also be “linked to painful experiences such as...events in the diaspora” (Mishra 10).

<sup>73</sup> Although Baumann is referring to Great Britain here, I believe this analysis is applicable to most South Asian diasporas. There is no real formula that may be assigned to identities that can lay claim to multiple ethnicities. Because children are the future they are often the targets of much cultural education, yet such forced acculturation may not be the answer.

<sup>74</sup> Gurus in Dabydeen, Brata and Desai do not struggle with the British colonial presence while connecting with their community through religion.

<sup>75</sup> Although Trinidad changed hands between the Spanish, French and British, it is the British influence that is most clearly pronounced in this novel. Trinidad became a British colony in 1889 and did not obtain self-governance till 1958. In 1962 it gained independence from the British Empire. Thus when Naipaul’s novel was written Trinidad was a British colony.

Born in a village called Fourways, Ganesh is pulled in three directions: the Indian (represented by his father, Mr. Ramsumair, and the Indo-Trinidadian community), the British colonial (Ganesh's school, the English principal of the school and Mr. Stewart who teaches Ganesh about Hinduism and India), and the Indo-Trinidadian (comprising his aunt "The Great Belcher" and his friend, Beharry, both of whom have embraced Trinidad and who encourage Ganesh to appropriate India through Hinduism).<sup>76</sup> The multiple claims to identity and the resulting instabilities prompt Ganesh to look for an identity that can exist not only within the colonizer's educational/political/social systems, but that is also acceptable by the host and his father, simultaneously.<sup>77</sup>

The Indian community of Fourways is firmly rooted in their culture and customs. They continue to enact the Hindu religious ceremonies and ritual in an attempt to preserve ethnic and personal identity. The community-sanctioned practices and beliefs create a familiar space for Ganesh where he can interact with people like him. The creation of this space is intentional and advantageous to the Indo-Trinidadians:

under an ordinance from the Indian government, they [Indian families] were not allowed to be split up when they landed. This gave Indians a monumental historical advantage over Trinidadians of African descent. The emphasis in Indian culture on strong family and caste ties enabled them to retain and build a sense of community abroad. (French 12)

This familiar space, however, provides a fixity/stability that is undesirable because it does not allow the inhabitants of the community to adopt or to interact with the diaspora. As a guru,

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<sup>76</sup> As I shall show, these associations traumatize him, deepen his need for stability and fuel his search for an alternate identity. Where identity is complicated by the presence of several different cultures, allegiance to any one cultural idea can be stressful.

<sup>77</sup> For critics like Sood: "Britain and India are the contenders: Trinidad does not factor into the ethnic identity of the Indian Trinidadian characters" (98). Although Trinidad "does not factor in" to the ethnic equation, Ganesh's Indo-Trinidadian community requires him to prove his Indian ethnicity. If Ganesh were in India the question of proof would have been moot. While his identity is formed by the British and Indian influences, Ganesh must learn to make Gururism function in Trinidad.

Ganesh later learns to value the “ties” and the “sense of community” when his submission to the pressures of tradition and ritual proves beneficial to him on two levels: the monetary, and quite ironically, the emotional. He then designs his Guruism through religious networks that allow the disciples a certain amount of mobility—so that it is easy to be Indian in Guyana.

As a child, however, Ganesh’s interaction with his community is stressful and often traumatic. As Wen-Shing Tseng and John F. McDermott point out, “Culturally formed nations and beliefs make a certain way of life possible; at the same time, they may produce stresses, problems, and vulnerabilities” (13). Trauma, as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is an “injury” or “a disordered psychic or behavioral state resulting from severe mental or emotional stress or physical injury.” The word trauma in Hindi “is *aghat(a)*, which means, literally, blow, shock, injury as well as killing and a slaughter-house” (“Traumatic Memory” 109). Trauma in this novel, as I shall prove, is psychogenic and reactive—stemming primarily from mental shocks born from Ganesh’s efforts to understand religious rituals.

Ganesh is visibly traumatized for the first time during the *Upanayan* or “Sacred Thread” ceremony.<sup>78</sup> The ceremony marks the coming of age of young boys. Hindu boys, especially those who belong to the Brahmin caste, are required to wear the sacred thread. Each region in India performs the ceremony differently, but what seems to be common is the significance of the thread itself. As Raymond Brady Williams writes:

The sacred thread remains a symbol of the transmission of religious tradition through the stream of generations. Possession of a sacred thread admits the young person to the storehouse of ancient wisdom through the study of sacred texts, participation in rituals of home and temple, and acquaintance with learned saints and teachers... *a boy becomes a man with a solid identity, a clear focus on a definite tradition, and a secure place in a community.* (3)<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> The people of Fourways have modeled the rituals for their ceremonies exactly on those of their forefathers—thus performing them however they were executed in India. Unlike them, Ganesh later reforms some of the rituals to suit their lives in Trinidad.

<sup>79</sup> My emphasis.

With the “ancient wisdom,” however, comes a heavy burden. The strands of the sacred thread signify certain “debts” (for example, debt to God, to the parents and ancestors, to Hindu sages/scholars etc.) that the wearer should not forget. Those wearing the thread constantly “carry” the memory of the “debts” because this thread may never be taken off, and the debt can never be paid.

The promise of “a solid identity, a clear focus on a definite tradition, and a secure place in a community” is also jeopardized by the ritual part of this ceremony that provides Ganesh with “fresh mortification” (11). Ganesh is dealt a “blow” when his head is shaved as part of the *Upanayan*. The shaved head (often considered a punishment in some cultures) that “displays” his ethnicity becomes the subject of much amusement in his school: “the boys laughed so much that the principal called him and said, ‘Ramsumair, you are creating a *disturbance* in the school. Wear something on your head’” (11).<sup>80</sup> The celebration of the *Upanayan* itself points to the “dual nature of the traits, behaviors, beliefs and attitudes that are integrated into the total system of a culture” (Tseng and McDermott 13). The ceremony and the rituals, deemed necessary for Ganesh’s acquaintance with the ways of his ancestors, begin to isolate him from the other Indians.<sup>81</sup> Any other boy of Ganesh’s ethnic background, but of a different caste, would not have had to suffer this double alienation—from the self and from the Trinidadian community. For example, his non-Brahmin (therefore with an unshaved head), Hindu classmate Indarsingh is very popular and well admired.

Ganesh’s trauma alienates him from not only the larger social structure in the host country, but also from himself. At the end of the *Upanayan* ceremony, as is the custom, the

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<sup>80</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>81</sup> While Indarsingh wins a scholarship to England and thereby, according to Ganesh, achieves “greatness beyond ambition,” Ganesh faces more difficulties (12).

priest blesses him to “Go to Benares and study” (11). The young Ganesh, however, is perplexed by the ritual because the city of Benares is not located in Trinidad, but in India. Ganesh took “his staff...[and] began walking away briskly from Fourways” (11). The psychological implications of this ritual on him are belied by Ganesh’s brisk walk and by his intense absorption in the ceremony: forcibly stopped, “caught” and then brought home, Ganesh is reprimanded for “this nonsense” (11). The nonsensical “brisk walk” is probably Ganesh’s attempt to escape the scene. Since Ganesh does not actually know where he is going, the fast pace of the walk may also depict his nervous confusion.

The impossible, yet indispensable (since the walk completes the ritual) and imagined return to Benaras and his shaved head teach Ganesh that a certain amount of performance is necessary to successfully conform to all customs. The performance also helps to maintain some semblance of authenticity. Thus when he becomes a guru, Ganesh focuses on the enactment of the rituals and it pleases his clients whenever his “mystical leanings” are clearly perceived (6). Ironically, as I shall show, the often-exaggerated nature of these performances also presents the guru in an amusing light. Once such a performance has been achieved “the need to repeat the performance can bring about new stress” (Tseng and McDermott 16). The success of these rituals makes it necessary for Ganesh to repeat them.

The traumatic religious education at home is complimented with the equally demeaning education offered by the British. Ganesh father’s preference for the English school illustrates “the hierarchical relationship between the Indian and the British national consciousness in that Britain, not Trinidad and definitely not India, is the place for proper schooling” (Sood 98). Mr. Ramsumair’s colonial aspirations are also exhibited in his choice of clothing. To cover his shaved head, Ganesh is forced to wear “the khaki toupee in the classroom until his hair grew

again” (12). The apparel testifies to his father’s admiration for *sahibs*. Since Mr. Ramsumair and the people of his village believe that Ganesh’s “khaki suit and a khaki toupee” made him look “like a little sahib” (9).<sup>82</sup> The embarrassing Indian “self” (the shaved head) can sometimes be hidden behind a copied *sahib* look. The attempt to hide the Indian self, however, illustrates that outside the arena of rituals there is no power or security in being Indian. As a guru, Ganesh will attempt to bring back some of this lost power by embracing the *dhoti* and *kurta*.<sup>83</sup>

The adopted *sahib* look, however, has its problems. When little Ganesh leaves the village to go to the Queen’s Royal College in Port of Spain his “dress and manner were no longer drawing looks of respect. People were smiling” (10).<sup>84</sup> Unlike Mr. Ramsumair who does not seem to notice, the “smiling” people disturb Ganesh. The latter felt “shy” and “was near to sobbing” (10). In hopes that the boys would accept him the next day, Ganesh did not wear the khaki toupee and was dressed only in the khaki suit. The “old boys [still] laughed” and “then there was a scene in the principal’s office: his father gesticulating...the English principal patient, then firm, and finally exasperated; the old man enraged muttering, ‘*Gaddaha! Gaddaha!*’” (10). Although Ganesh “preferred not to remember what happened” he “never lost his awkwardness” (10). The attempt to erase such memories conveys the anxiety that led to Ganesh’s “awkwardness.” Erasure, however, is not possible and the embarrassed “Gaddaha” (Hindi for “donkey”) is “*almost the same, but not quite*” *sahib* enough for the English principal or the school.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> *Sahib* is an Urdu term that refers to a ruler or owner. With colonialism the term was mainly associated with male members of the British establishment.

<sup>83</sup> These are the traditional Indian attire for men. Today, the younger generation wears it only during special occasions.

<sup>84</sup> Ganesh began college on an awkward note because of yet another reason: he “was not as advanced as the other boys” and was “always the oldest boy in his class” (9). His clothes, however, attracted more attention.

<sup>85</sup> I am borrowing the phrase from Bhabha’s essay “Of Mimicry and Man.” P. 266.

The *sahib* attire provides them no refuge but their knowledge of Hindi often comes to their rescue.<sup>86</sup> For example, whenever Mr. Ramsumair has to instruct Ganesh, or abuse those he presumes do not know Hindi but are within hearing, he speaks that language. Mr. Ramsumair adjusts easily between his English attire and Hindi. As such, his choice to hold onto some components (language and religion) of the “home” culture and not others (clothing) displays his own confused understanding of what it means to be Indian. This confusion is perhaps a condition of his postcolonial hybridity.<sup>87</sup> For Ganesh, however, the social mobility that he desires in Trinidad does not come from the familiar religious rituals or his colonial education. The rituals and the attire make him the laughing stock. Although the English language ensures his academic success, Ganesh finds it difficult to speak in English.

Commenting on Naipaul’s use of language, Divya Sood suggests that the novel functions on three main linguistic planes:

British English becomes the proper and Britain then, symbolically, becomes the place of academic propriety and learning. Hindi is seen as the language of the mystic and hence India, metaphorically, becomes the place of spirituality and mystic identity. And, finally, in being the land of Creole where language is both proper and improper, and in being the land where dialect prevails, we see Trinidad as the place of fusion and mixture. (96)

Although the dialect is spoken, it is not cherished: “Like many Trinidadians Ganesh could write correct English but it embarrassed him to talk anything but dialect...So while...he perfected his prose to a Victorian weightiness he continued to talk Trinidadian, much against his will” (65).<sup>88</sup>

This rejection of the host country also entails a dismissal of the culture that the language

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<sup>86</sup> Although the Indians are the majority in Trinidad, Hindi is not the official language.

<sup>87</sup> This is how most of us live in India. Our casual or official attire today does not constitute *sarees* and *kurtas*. We speak in Benglish and Hinglish, for example, and most of the sentences are in multiple languages. Mr. Ramsumair’s “child-rearing practices and attitudes” undeniably influences Ganesh’s personality (Tseng and McDermott 21). Throughout the novel the guru wavers between western attire and his Hindu, Indian self. Ganesh’s upbringing thus contributed to “culturally formed vulnerabilities” (Tseng and McDermott 21).

<sup>88</sup> Even though any attempts to talk in “proper” English made him look “damn funny,” Ganesh rejects the dialect of the host country (66).

carries.<sup>89</sup> Thus when he becomes a guru, Ganesh is primarily concerned with his Hindu and English identities.<sup>90</sup>

Ganesh's early disengagement from his community is amplified by his colonial education. Analyzing the effects of a colonial education on children, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o writes that there was a complete disconnect between a child's "written world, which was also the language of his schooling, and the world of his immediate environment in the family and the community" (17). This resulted in "colonial alienation" where the child was dissociated "from his natural and social environment" (Ngugi 17). Several times during his career as a guru, Ganesh encounters this discrepancy between his public and private spheres. The guru's attempts to fuse his English education with his Hindu background determine his philosophies.

The language of mystical India is hard to avoid as it often intrudes into the language of academic learning. A native name, spelt out in the English alphabet is an example of such an intrusion. By naming his son "Ganesh"—a name borrowed from Hindu religious mythology—Mr. Ramsumair constricts the "little Sahib." Ganesh shares his name with a Hindu god who literally lost his head because of his uncle's mistake. His father, Lord Shiva, then gave him a new head—that of an elephant's.<sup>91</sup> Today the deity is worshipped and recognized with the elephant

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<sup>89</sup> I am thinking of Ngugi's idea here: "language carries culture" (16).

<sup>90</sup> This is one of the reasons why he leaves Trinidad and ceases to be a guru. The guru wanted to change Trinidad by assuming leadership over the Indian (through his religious role) and the British (through his role as MLC and MBE) sides, but he fails to understand that Trinidad cannot be completely independent as the guru intended it to because of its colonial past.

<sup>91</sup> Commenting on the origin of the God Ganesh, Kakar writes: "The elephant-headed god Ganesh is born solely due to the agency of his father Shiva in one myth, 'proving' that his existence is indubitably masculine, while in another version he is created out of the impurities of his mother's body without paternal intervention" (273). In this novel, the protagonist's mother is absent and his father has named him. By Kakar's logic then, Ganesh's existence is solely masculine. In naming himself Gareth, Ganesh attempts to rob Mr. Ramsumair of any agency.



head. Naipaul's Ganesh too has a head that makes him stand out, becomes part of his identity and is "given" to him by his father.<sup>92</sup>

Ganesh, however, "was so ashamed of his Indian name that for a while he spread a story that he was really called Gareth" (10-11).<sup>93</sup> The fictional "Gareth" is Ganesh's attempt to neutralize his identity for approval, although "Gareth" fabricates his present by distorting the ideas of his origin and of his past.<sup>94</sup> The shame and the "story" demonstrate Ganesh's lack of confidence in his own identity. Since our name is part and parcel of who we are, by trying to erase his actual name Ganesh is only belittling himself. Such "Self-depreciation," as Tseng and McDermott argue "results from compliance to strong external control, [and] can become a cause of depression" (22). The Indian name is a vulnerability that he attempts to hide. Where group

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<sup>92</sup> "The myths most commonly" associated with the deity Ganesh (or Ganesha) "are those which emphasise Ganesha's loyalty to his parents, his role in transcribing the religious masterpiece, the Mahabharata, from the sage Vyasa, and his role as the remover of all obstacles. Ganesha is the deity to whom all Hindus should pray first in *puja* or before undertaking any important task" (Mearns 171). Naipaul's Ganesh is loyal to his father for most of the novel and can be credited for "transcribing" books on Hinduism (though none of them are a masterpiece).

<sup>93</sup> From here onwards, we begin to notice a pattern. Ganesh is able to temporarily survive his traumatic diasporic existence primarily because he can lie. To be perceived as a guru, Ganesh manufactures numerous rituals, customs and religious texts. Each new fabrication helps to spread the guru's words, and as a sizeable congregation forms it becomes powerful to be Indian in British Trinidad. From a confused nobody, Ganesh becomes a socially/politically powerful figure and the core of the Indian community. The guru creates the mobility he desires.

<sup>94</sup> This act of creating fiction around identity has a communal precedence in this novel.

Throughout the novel, this community exhibits little eccentricities for the love of a home that never was, and ideas about Hindus and Hinduism are bandied about with thoughtlessly. Even the act of naming one's child becomes a ridiculous exercise as parents choose between names like Jawaharlal, Sarojini and Motilal respectively. When Ganesh decides to marry Leela, his father's friend's daughter, they are forced to pretend that they had never met before their wedding day. Naipaul explains: "because they were both good Hindus and knew it was wrong for a man to see his wife before marriage" (37). Ganesh marries Leela thinking she "looked chastened and impassive, a good Hindu wife" (44). Fictions about Indian culture are thus created and are not easy to avoid.

judgment does not threaten and there is no risk of being reprimanded by the community, Ganesh makes himself less vulnerable by becoming “Gareth.”<sup>95</sup>

There are no external signs of Ganesh’s depression, however, there are other repercussions since “Culture-produced stress can set in motion a cycle in which anxiety produces problems which produce renewed anxiety” (Tseng and McDermott 14). The “renewed anxiety” stems from repeated requirements to conform and to “perform” conformity—whether that is with his ethnical/Indian side, or his educational/British side. Ganesh finds it increasingly difficult to express himself or to even exhibit his own personality. Because “he felt he ought to flatter” and please others, he never articulates what he wants (13). After his graduation, when Ganesh begins to teach in a Primary school in the Port of Spain the principal of the school warns him “the purpose of this school is to form, not to inform” (14). The discouragement to try anything new and the inability to voice his opinion or assert his rights forces Ganesh to leave the school disappointed. While the Indian part of his identity constricts him and leaves him powerless at home, the British colonial systems do not allow him to act in larger socio-cultural spaces.

Ganesh’s divided personality and the claims his relationships make on him constantly create a crisis within him. This crisis may be a result of Ganesh’s position in a predominantly western culture. Kakar notes, for instance:

Whereas the modern Western sciences of man conceive of the person as an *individual* (indivisible) nature that is enduring, closed and has an internally homogeneous nature that is enduring, Indian theories (as evidenced in astrological, biological, moral and ritual texts) hold the person to be a *dividual*, i.e., divisible...Hindu persons...are constituted of relationships; all affects, needs and motives are relational and *their distresses are disorders of relationships*. (274-5)<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Although it may be argued that the name Gareth does not clearly point to any particular ethnicity, Ganesh seems to have chosen an English name. Sir Gareth, King Arthur’s nephew, and one of the knights of the round table disguises himself as a kitchen boy. His true identity is discovered through his brave actions.

<sup>96</sup> My emphasis.

There is no escaping the “disorders of relationships,” particularly in a community that values closeness and has learned to define itself as a part of the whole.<sup>97</sup> At his father’s funeral, for example, Ganesh met “scores of people he didn’t know [who] scrambled towards him with outstretched arms, bawling” (18). The “outstretched arms” require him to mourn the dead by “bawling”—even before he has seen his father’s body. The words “scores” and “scrambled” convey the disorder. When Ganesh is finally in the coffin room, he notices that the oil lamp “threw monstrous shadows on the walls and the galvanized-iron ceiling” (19). The familiar feeling of sorrow at a funeral is overtaken by fear.

Yet the fear must be suppressed, for he “had to do many things, and he did without thought or question everything the pundit, his aunt, and Ramlogan asked him” (20). Ganesh mechanically applies the “caste-marks to the old man’s forehead” and does everything else “until it seemed that ritual had replaced grief” (20). Naipaul’s own account of similar rituals he had to perform is not very different: “in myself, like the split-second images of infancy which some of us carry, there survive, from the family rituals that lasted into my childhood, phantasmal memories of old India” (*India: A Wounded Civilization* Foreword x).<sup>98</sup> The constricting family rituals, for both the author and Ganesh are “phantasmal” and “monstrous” respectively.

The community’s involvement with Ganesh does not stop with Mr. Ramsumair’s funeral, and Ganesh’s anxiety attacks are unavoidable because of his physical proximity with the concerned villagers. They prod Ganesh to do something with his English education and force

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<sup>97</sup> Ganesh’s relationship with India and his ethnicity is strikingly similar to that of Naipaul’s. As Naipaul writes: “India is for me a difficult country. It isn’t my home and cannot be my home; and yet I cannot reject it or be indifferent to it...I am once too close and too far” (*India: A Wounded Civilization* Foreword ix). The narrative of the novel, I suggest, pushes Ganesh closer to his ethnicity and situations are created which he cannot avoid.

<sup>98</sup> There are many such moments in the novel that suggest that Naipaul’s delineation of Ganesh’s traumatic childhood echoes the author’s own trials and tribulations as a child.

him to do “a lot of thinking” (22).<sup>99</sup> Protected by oil royalties that provide him with a fixed source of income per month, Ganesh could afford to be jobless in Fourways. But tired of all the expectations, he “began to feel a little strange and feared he was going mad...he sometimes felt cut off from them” (22). The dis-attachment and the anxiety continue, as “Culturally formed anxiety and culturally demanded performance both produce mental and emotional stresses” (Tseng and McDermott 14). There is no remedy or therapy for this anxiety, nor for the near-insanity it brings about in him. This is primarily because his parents and his community do not sense Ganesh’s trauma. The dis-attachment he desires seems to be impossible and the constant communal pressures slowly enable him to understand that: “We never are what we want to be...but what we must be” (64).

Ganesh finds it hard to escape the grasp of tradition and he learns to find a “better” life by not deviating from culture.<sup>100</sup> As a guru, Ganesh embraces the very same Hindu rituals and customs that he tried to evade as a child. When Mr. Ramsumair’s friend, Ramlogan, tricks Ganesh into marrying his daughter, Leela, Ganesh’s life changes forever.<sup>101</sup> Ganesh magically cures Leela, who suffers from an imaginary ailment. Thus although he became “a struggling masseur, at a time when masseurs were ten a penny in Trinidad,” it was soon discovered that Ganesh had a “gift of healing” (1). The traumatic rituals and their incompatibility with his education, a genuine lack of knowledge in medicine and his awareness of his community’s

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<sup>99</sup> Ganesh refuses to take up work with the Americans as a massager and knows that once the Americans leave Trinidad the situation will be different. By rejecting a job with the Americans Ganesh fights Imperialism and a re-colonization of sorts, only to return to it later in the novel.

<sup>100</sup> “Culture,” as Tseng and McDermott define it, “is the collective expression of the group’s personality—its wishes, values, and ideology. It is the sum total of knowledge and attitudes, a vast accumulation of ways of thought, of action, and of emotional expression. Culture is based on behavior and values transmitted through generations. It is traditional and fairly well fixed. Yet it is not cast in mental-emotional-behavioral cement” (6).

<sup>101</sup> While it was Mrs. Cooper, Ganesh’s landlady during his college days in Port of Spain, who first notices that Ganesh has “a powerhouse for an aura,” it is Ramlogan who triggers the “powerhouse” (16).

readiness to believe in spiritual healing coerce him to become a spiritual leader. The little lies he tells about himself in school graduate into a bigger lie when Ganesh convinces the Indian community that he has had a spiritual calling.

### **Understanding the Sacred**

Ganesh begins his spiritual career with minor cases: he “could cure a *nara*, a simple stomach dislocation, as well as any masseur, and he could cure stiff joints. However, he could never bring himself to risk bigger operations” (62). When he fails to cure a girl with a twisted arm, he lies to her mother and tells her that: “nothing wrong with the girl, *maharajin*. She only have a little bad blood, that is all. And too besides, God make she that way and is not for me to interfere in God work” (62). As expected, the explanation goes unchallenged. God and God’s work begin to reappear in his diagnoses here onwards.

Ganesh could have been a community leader without a religious agenda. However, the adoption of Guruism is necessitated since religion determines the life of his community, and it is feasible to communicate with them in the terms that they will understand:

Indian society is organized *around the primacy of the therapeutic* in the sense that Indians seem to emphasize protection and caring in their social...more than the values of performance and equality. *This stress on the therapeutic* is reflected in many facets of Indian culture, including its myriad gods and goddesses (three hundred and thirty million at last count, corresponding to the country’s population at the time this figure was ‘calculated’), and the profusion of myths and legends that surround them. (“Shamans, Mystics and Doctors” 272)<sup>102</sup>

Ganesh’s “gift of healing” makes him important in a community that places “stress on the therapeutic.” But Ganesh soon learns to offer a different kind of therapy. The communal rituals and traditions bred familiarity and trained the individual to look for the “self” within the communal whole—not the host country. Ganesh, however, provides a space (both political and social) built “around the primacy of the therapeutic,” where individuals are more important than

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<sup>102</sup> My emphasis.

traditions and the guru's religious networks make it possible to interact with the host. This is primarily why the masses are attracted to his ideas. Owing to the authoritative religious power, the diagnosis and the cure now lie in his hands. In a way, then, Ganesh becomes the priest who had once ordered the "little sahib" to walk to Benaras, although he reforms the role of the religious leader.

As a postcolonial guru, Ganesh is first attracted to Hindu philosophy and then to Western psychology. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes: "The act, let alone the art and science, of theorizing our own existence and realities is not something which many indigenous people assume is possible" (103).<sup>103</sup> In *The Mystic Masseur*, Mr. Stewart, who "had recently appeared in South Trinidad dressed as a Hindu mendicant," provides Ganesh with theories about Hindus.<sup>104</sup> Dressed in "yellow robe like a Buddhist monk," Mr. Stewart talked to Ganesh about Hinduism in Hindi (26). Disillusioned with Christianity after the First World War, Mr. Stewart was convinced that Hindus are the "Only people really striving after the indefinite today" (29). He presents Ganesh with twenty copies of *The Science of Thought Review*.

Published by "The Science of Thought Press" in London, *Science of Thought Review* is a magazine "Devoted to the teaching of right thinking."<sup>105</sup> Henry Thomas Hamblin (1873-1958), editor and founder of the magazine, also known as the "Saint of Sussex," believed in the power of the individual. In Hamblin's own words: "man is the Author of his own troubles; that they are

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<sup>103</sup> Psychology and the process through which it determines how to cure people should pay attention to the culture the people come from (See Kakar, See also Shing).

<sup>104</sup> Mr. Stewart: "claimed that he was Kashmiri...but it was generally assumed that he was English, a millionaire, and a little mad" (27). Ganesh initially thought him to be a "crazy crazy" man who had "funny cateyes that frighten" (27).

<sup>105</sup> The magazine was first published in October 1921. Today, the Henry Thomas Hamblin Trust "continues to publish the bi-monthly magazine Hamblin started in 1921, now called *New Vision*. The magazine has a broad multi-faith perspective, featuring articles on mythology, the environment, philosophy and theology. Each magazine has a monthly 'theme' based on the spiritual courses of HT Hamblin." See: <<http://www.thehamblintrust.org.uk/biography.htm>>

created in his own mind both conscious and subconscious; that the attitude of the mind and soul acts as a transformer changing the Good Force into seeming evil.”<sup>106</sup> Although Ganesh always forgets what he read, he read profusely and ritualistically “copied out the passages” on Hinduism and history (72).<sup>107</sup> I suggest that the appeal of the magazine for Ganesh lies in its restoration of social power to the individual, making the individual primary.<sup>108</sup> Hitherto, Ganesh had only learned to lose the individual within the whole and to believe in fate. The knowledge of the primacy of the individual affects Ganesh’s Guruism, and he does not dismiss the often-weird illness symptoms that his clients complain of.

His first official case is a little boy plagued by an imaginary black cloud that is threatening to take the boy’s life. The fear of the cloud torments the boy who was “thin,” “bony and brittle,” although “it was clear that he had once been strong” (117). Doctors had pronounced the boy “mad” and priests were helpless (115). Ganesh does not reject the existence of the cloud and convinces the boy that he believes in him—thereby winning the boy’s trust. Ganesh then creates a “frightening” atmosphere by hanging heavy curtains over the windows and by “giving the goddess Lakshmi pride of place just above the screened and upturned table” (121). He burned “night camphor and incense” all night in the room (121). When the boy arrives, Ganesh is dressed in his Hindu garments and Leela “her long black hair undone, sat in front of the table and

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<sup>106</sup> See: <<http://www.mediumsandhealers.com/hamblin.html>>

<sup>107</sup> The journal has many other advantages. It often becomes an escape for Ganesh. Just before his wedding night when his relatives “descended on him” and “sang Hindi wedding songs of a most pessimistic nature,” Ganesh “remained in his room, consoling himself” with the journal (41, 43).

<sup>108</sup> Like Naipaul, Ganesh too finds solace in the colonizer. Explaining his move to England, Naipaul writes: “But I always recognized, in England in the 1950s, that as someone with a writing vocation, there was nowhere else for me to go...I would say that it is the civilization that both gave the prompting and the idea of the literary vocation; and also gave the means to fulfill that prompting; the civilization that enables me to make that journey from the periphery to the center” (“Our Universal Civilization”). This move from the periphery to the center, Naipaul continues, allowed him to see or feel “certain things more freshly than people to whom those things were everyday” (“Our Universal Civilization”).

faced the boy and his parents” (122). Using the resources that the oilfield provides, Ganesh makes it possible for the cloud to appear during the boy’s visit.

The atmosphere created by the “presence” of the goddess, the smell of the incense and Leela’s disguise is mystical, scary and religious—one in which it would not be too surprising if a black cloud were to suddenly appear. As the cloud emerges Ganesh, fervently chanting prayers in Hindi, banishes the cloud with great pomp. I suggest that the prayers he recites soften the scary atmosphere and present Ganesh’s mystical powers in a favorable light. The appearance of the black cloud thus does not become associated with black magic or sorcery. Since the prayers are in Hindi, Ganesh seems to be genuine. Analyzing his own techniques he admits that: “It make them [his patients] feel good...hearing me talk a language they can’t understand” (125). The performance, the frightening atmosphere and the Hindi couplets allow his patients to believe in his divinity.<sup>109</sup> Once the patients have faith in him, the guru’s task is easier.

The Hindi or Sanskrit recitations during the rituals are crucial in creating the appearance of Ganesh’s divinity. As Kusha K. Haraksingh informs:

the less learned [priests] made much capital of the mystery associated with the Sanskrit *mantras*, words and phrases which in any case were often incapable of any precise translation and where the sound itself was important. It is to be surmised that priests of this category took refuge in the power of the ritual, and fostered a situation in which something had to be done or left undone simply because the pandit said so. (175)<sup>110</sup>

During the cloud banishing ritual, Ganesh learns that the little boy’s brother had been run over by a truck on his way to buy ice cream. The brother was not originally supposed to go, but the

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<sup>109</sup> Some of the manuscripts that Ganesh possesses are in Hindi, while some are in Sanskrit. It is not clear, however, whether Ganesh ever learned Sanskrit. When he treats his “patients,” Ganesh is heard muttering Hindi phrases, but never Sanskrit ones. It is probable that he never read the Sanskrit manuscripts, and that would indicate that he never gained complete knowledge of Hindu philosophy as charted out by his uncle.

<sup>110</sup> He adds that the: “The absence of explanation and substitution of ritual for enlightenment would ‘fuel’ reformist charges levelled by the emerging Arya Samajists in the 1930s against priests of the orthodox school” (175).



little boy had asked him to. Importantly, the guilt or the “black cloud” that burdened the boy stemmed from what the priests had told the boy. As the boy tells Ganesh: “The priest and everybody else say was my fault and I have to pay for my sins” (119). Ganesh dismisses the ritual of ‘paying for our sins’ and takes “refuge in the power of the ritual” he creates. The boy is freed both from the cloud and from burden of “paying for his sins.” Ganesh begins to increasingly incorporate rituals when he learns that they, “particularly the women, loved it so he too ordered them to burn things two or three times a day” (141).

To obtain the freedom he desires, Ganesh is occasionally forced to adopt constricting traditions. For example, to authenticate and strengthen his performance during the rituals, Ganesh deserts the trousers and shirt for “a proper dhoti and *koortah*” (113). Although it makes him feel “funny wearing it,” it is important that he look Indian (113). The seemingly ignorant understanding of what it means to dress Indian, illustrates yet another problem. The “dhoti” and “koortah” are normal, everyday clothes for some Indian men, mystics or not.<sup>111</sup> Categorizing the attire as appropriate clothing for mystics, however, allows him to beneficially appropriate “home” again. Paradoxically, the spiritual elevation comes at a price. As his friend, Beharry, tells Ganesh: “Nobody would believe now that you did go to the Christian college in Port of Spain. Man, you look like a pukka brahmin” (113).

Yet owing to the profession Ganesh has chosen, this attire makes him look “dignified,” and he admits that he can feel his “luck change as from today” (113).<sup>112</sup> His trousers and shirt are now referred to as the “English clothes” and are only worn by Ganesh whenever he needs to step

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<sup>111</sup> In India today this attire is mostly worn for special occasions.

<sup>112</sup> Leela’s adoption of this version of Indian, however, is frowned upon. For Suruj Mooma, Beharry’s wife, Ganesh “wearing dhoti and Leela wearing sari is two different things” (130). Leela’s adoption of the sari is “damn nonsense,” (129-30) Ganesh looks “like a real *maharaj*” (113). While Ganesh can show off his ethnicity, because he has the learning, Leela cannot because “All she life she knocking about in bodice and long skirt” (130). The sari on Leela becomes inauthentic and shows her “conceit.”

into the real world (121). The negativity associated with “Indian” clothing, languages, food and religious rituals have now all been outmaneuvered. In Ganesh’s newly created profession it is profitable to a “pukka Brahmin” (113).<sup>113</sup> His community’s faith in religion, religious leaders, medicine and doctors all seem to have been transferred to a single spiritual leader—the guru.

By helping the boy and others like him, the guru is able to do what abstract religious philosophies and medical science cannot do for those complaining of unusual illnesses in Naipaul’s Trinidad. Part of the guru’s power comes from the faith that people bestow on him. Ganesh “had never imagined there were so many people in Trinidad with spiritual problems. But what surprised him even more was the extent of his own powers” (127). Ganesh’s community wants to believe in him and their need/wish to believe in him makes him more influential. The village grapevine enhances the guru’s charm. When news of the cure spreads, Ganesh’s “successes were magnified, and his Powers became Olympian” (125). In rural Trinidad, the grapevine has a more far-reaching effect than the media. The grapevine is free, and the villagers tend to trust it more.

Hinduism in Trinidad, as Ganesh styles it, is less about gods and goddesses and more about magical rituals for troubled individuals. Ganesh’s rituals successfully fuse “formal religious beliefs” (through Hinduism) with magic (Trinidadian spirituality). Ganesh’s patients do not need to visit obeah men because of the magical elements in his rituals. His ability to conjure up clouds at a moment’s notice makes him popular, and although “Every obeah-man was quick enough to call himself a mystic...the people of Trinidad knew that Ganesh was the only true

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<sup>113</sup> The mothers of second-generation immigrants usually play an important role when it comes to teaching their children about the “home.” As Sharpe points out there is a relation between the number of women present in a diasporic community and that community’s retention of indigenous cultures. Sharpe writes that women “constitute a larger percentage of the immigrants than ever before, a factor that has contributed to diasporic communities being able to maintain their cultural autonomy” (120). In the novels I analyze in this project, however, the spiritual men are the carriers of ethnicity and protectors of their “home” culture.

mystic in the island” (128). As Ganesh realizes: “To be part of the Hindu fold...was to be enveloped in some amount of mystery” (Haraksingh 175).<sup>114</sup> Steven Vertovec points out that in popular Hinduism the

beliefs and practices undertaken or maintained by lay believers...include...‘cult’ phenomena (collective religious activity directed towards some specific but usually unorthodox focus, such as an extraordinary person, sacred place or item, or supernatural being propitiated by a relative minority). (110)

The unorthodox nature (the fusion of basic science, psychology, Hindu philosophy, and the rejection of constricting rituals) of Ganesh’s orthodox practice lends a charm to his Guruism.

The guru’s absorption in understanding the community and life through Hindu mythology often creates comical situations. Ganesh, for instance, is eager to apply his knowledge to even mundane matters by relating it to events in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Often Ganesh and his friend, Beharry, relentlessly try to understand the Second World War through the newfound lens of Hindu philosophy. Beharry was “full of quotations from the *Gita*, and Ganesh read again, with fuller appreciation, the dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna on the field of battle” (102). Hindu philosophy did not lead them to a better understanding of the war. Instead, “Forgetting the war, he [Ganesh] became an Indologist and bought all the books on Hindu philosophy he could get in San Fernando” (102).<sup>115</sup> This attempt to interpret the current political scenario using religion stems from a deep-rooted vulnerability. Both Ganesh and the Naipaul share this weakness. As

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<sup>114</sup> When Ganesh begins his mystic career, most of his clients are from villages. As Smith writes: “For the lowest status group [in Indo-Caribbean villages], religion is full of magical elements...In addition to formal religious beliefs and practice, use is made of obeah men, or of special healing practitioners who use magical means; some Brahmin priests provide such services as a sideline” (135). Similarly, Trinidadians also borrow from Hinduism. See Noorkumar Mahabir and Ashram Maharaj’s “Hindu Elements in the Shango/Orisha Cult of Trinidad.” Mahabir and Maharaj write that: “Many Baptists and Shangoists perform *pūja* (Hindu ceremonial worship) which they refer to as ‘sitting down prayers’ in which a *pandit* (Hindu priest) officiates. Both Hindus and Orisha participants believe that every age has its own prophet” (102).

<sup>115</sup> “India was his great love” (102). He only bought books that referred to India.

Naipaul writes: “The adaptation of my own family and Trinidad Indian community to the colonial Trinidad and, through that, to the twentieth century hadn’t been easy. It had been painful for us, an Asian people, living instinctive, ritualized lives, to awaken to an idea of our history and to learn to live with the idea of our political helplessness” (“Our Universal Civilization”).

The religious mythology that Ganesh adopts is important because it acts as a substitute for the history of his ancestors that the guru cannot otherwise access. As a guru, Ganesh cannot keep this knowledge to himself. He must “teach them [his community] like children” (83). His aunt, the “Great Belcher,” suggests that he market his skills by using “his learning to help out other people” (104). Hitherto the guru had relied on village grapevines to make his Guruism known. However, Ganesh decides to take control of the way in which his image is disseminated over the religious networks. To help him “cure people...Cure the mind, cure the soul,” his aunt gifts him with his dead uncle’s book on Hindu prayers and rituals (105).

Ganesh inherited the book “with appropriate ceremony...[in] a parcel wrapped in red cotton splattered with sandalwood paste,” and realized that he “had something big to do” (106). His acceptance of his new role and his willingness to participate in the rituals that had once disturbed him now prove beneficial. The inheritance is important. McKean writes that:

Integral to a guru’s authority and authenticity is membership in a lineage of predecessors and successors who impart eternal and spiritual truths and the means to experience them...Gurus without such ascetic lineages generally claim affiliation with a renowned spiritual predecessor. Many of these more self-styled gurus possess an entrepreneurial flair for building networks of institutions and followers, networks that may grow to rival those of established ascetic lineages. (1-2)

Ganesh inherits his “authority and authenticity” from his dead uncle. His ethnicity becomes increasingly tolerable to him as he learns to use it. Ganesh is a “self-styled” guru, and his mantra to cure people is simple: “you must believe them, and they must know that you believe them”

(108). Although the power to perform the rituals still lies in his hands, Ganesh is willing to transfer some of the authority to his patient.

By believing in his patients, he recognizes their fears and by listening to what they have to say he provides them with a space to vocalize these fears. Ganesh becomes the therapist that he never had. The performance of rituals that once traumatized him is necessary, and as long as he is part of the community Ganesh is required to replicate it.<sup>116</sup> Guru Ganesh thus performs mystical miracles repeatedly, and this strengthens his authoritative position in the community. He builds a “network of institutions and followers” around this performance and strengthens his appeal through the religioscape. The guru uses different business tactics and ideas to set up monopolies, restaurants, businesses, temples, and lends support to small business. He disseminates ideas of the sacred through secular networks. What had started as a new kind of therapy is transported into a business organization that resembles the workings of a multinational corporation. Ganesh’s unique interpretation of sacred texts and rituals, and his ability to sell his version makes him the “business Man of God” (140). In the section that follows, the circulating religious ideas, the reformed rituals and the money thus generated prove to be beneficial to the guru and his community.

### **“The Business (Man) of God”**

Ganesh establishes his Guruism by making it visible. The guru creates a brand around the idea of the “mystic masseur,” and he continues to retail the concept through the media.<sup>117</sup> With the help of Beharry, Ganesh launches an advertising campaign titled “Who is Ganesh?” (110).

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<sup>116</sup> “What is needed, by therapist and layman alike, is to look at the demands a culture makes and ask, ‘Is this performance necessary?’” (Tseng and McDermott 16). But there is often times no escaping from this performance and there is no choice.

<sup>117</sup> A sign is created with the words “GANESH, *Mystic*” (110). It is proudly hung right outside his house in Fuente Grove. This sign physically marks Ganesh’s location and often helps his clients to locate him.

The campaign draws in people from all over Trinidad, and Fuente Grove is populated with the guru's clients. The guru also strengthens his social power by setting up a Cultural Institute at Fuente Grove with his wedding dowry. Ganesh pays the *Trinidad Sentinel* to print the details of the institute since the mere existence of the institute is not enough. The visibility of the structure of the institute and the advertisement make the guru's influence discernible. Prior to this, there were no perceptible markers of the existence of the Hindu population in the village of Fuente Grove. The publicity generated through the newly constructed institute creates awareness about Ganesh and his plans amongst the few who do read newspapers in Trinidad. The guru's knowledge of Hinduism earns him the title of "Ganesh pundit" (55).

As president of the Institute, dedicated to "the furthering of Hindu Cultural and Science of Thought in Trinidad," Ganesh begins writing books on Hinduism—authenticated by the security provided by his Cultural Institute. Inspired by the "Hollywood Hindus," Ganesh understood this need to "parade" his learning (108).<sup>118</sup> The books he writes and the magazines he edits become his primary method of communication with the masses.<sup>119</sup> His books are important in a "British country" like Trinidad where school children are not always taught about Indian icons (65). Ganesh's first book *101 Questions and Answers on the Hindu Religion* "became the first best-seller in the history of Trinidad publishing" (132). The book introduces Gandhi and Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru as the "greatest modern Hindu" leaders, and answers seemingly basic

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<sup>118</sup> The "Hollywood Hindus...live in or near Hollywood. They are holy, cultivated men who issue frequent bulletins about the state of their soul, the complexities and variations of which are endless and always worth description" (106). The words "variations" and "endless" denote the constant state of change that their souls are in and draw attention to the verity of their holiness. The phrase "always worth description" seems to indicate that whether there is anything worth mentioning or not, these men are convinced of the importance of their feelings. Their feigned spirituality makes them amusing. While the "Hollywood Hindus" "issue frequent bulletins about the state of their soul," Ganesh learns to write regularly.

<sup>119</sup> He even registers the "Ganesh Publishing Company, Limited" in Port of Spain: "The insignia of the firm was an open lotus" (146).

questions like “What is Hinduism” and “Why am I a Hindu” (132). The guru’s attempts to interpret Hinduism by relating it to popular icons in India play with the notion of culture and place. Through his books—the literary network—the guru carries and transports popular Indian culture into Trinidad. The questions he answers in the book are much like the ones that Ganesh would have liked answers to as a child. Ganesh’s concern is not with Trinidad alone, for he sent “signed copies [of his book] to the heads of all Governments he could think of,” and a copy to Gandhi—a figure the “Trinidad Indians of the 1940s drew inspiration from” (French 214).<sup>120</sup> Ganesh thus does not just wish to bring Indian icons to Trinidad, but he also aims to connect with the “home” country through Trinidad.

Gurus, in the novels examined in this project, do not always write books based on religious philosophies alone. For example, the book *Profitable Evacuation*, which “established Ganesh finally, without question,” is quite comically about constipation (153). Yet the book has an important message. Spirituality is not just about participating in rituals and chanting mantras. The body is equally important, as is self-nurture and faith in the Self.<sup>121</sup> Ganesh writes other books on general subjects. *What God Told Me* attracts a national readership: the book “set a fashion. Many people in many parts of Trinidad began seeing God. The most celebrated was Man-man of Miguel...[who] tried to crucify himself, and had to be put away” (152). The word “fashion” indicates the kind and extent of his grasp on the society: Ganesh is popular. While the outcome of seeing God is apparently not good, the incident with Man-man also illustrates the

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<sup>120</sup> However, when there was no reply from Gandhi, Ganesh consoled himself that “doubtless it was only the outbreak of the war that prevented an acknowledgement” (100). Interestingly, Naipaul’s uncle, Simbhoonath Capildeo, always “sent letters of supplication to Congress” (French 214).

<sup>121</sup> This attention to the body and to keep the self-fit is reminiscent of Gandhi and the ashram he creates in South Africa. Modern day gurus, like Deepak Chopra, too write books on diet and doshas. See for example Chopra’s *Perfect Weight* and *Perfect Health*. Ganesh writes many more books with titles like: *The Road to Happiness*, *Re-Incarnation*, *The Soul as I See It* and *The Necessity for Faith*. These are similar to the titles of Chopra’s other books.

nature of the power a guru can exert over people's imagination. Even though Ganesh is personally not Man-man's spiritual advisor, Man-man imagines he sees God primarily because Ganesh makes it possible for him to. However, Ganesh's books make his ideas/philosophies mobile, and this makes it possible for him to reach a larger audience, Hindu or non-Hindu.

Unlike Dabydeen's guru, Ganesh is popular with the Christian and Muslim communities. He "took as much interest in Christianity and Islam as in Hinduism" (128). He kept "pictures of Mary and Jesus next to Krishna and Vishnu; a crescent and star represented iconoclastic Islam" in a shrine he created in his bedroom (128).<sup>122</sup> The "mystic masseur" is popular also because of the "novelty" of talking mostly about the "good life...happiness and how to get it" (149). He "borrowed from Buddhism and other religions" and "didn't hesitate to say so" (150). At the meetings he "spoke with fervour about the Buddha's Fire Sermon" (150). Ganesh's theory, as he explained during his talks, was "that desire was a source of misery and therefore desire ought to be suppressed" (150).<sup>123</sup> The guru's attempts to neutralize his messages, which slowly become less about Hinduism and more about basic life philosophy, are noteworthy for the effect they create on the masses. For: "People sometimes understood [the guru] and when they got up they felt a little nobler" (150).

Explaining how the plantation-Indian diaspora deal with traumatic memory, Mishra writes in the introduction to *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora* that:

There is no immediate cure for the condition because the loss remains abstract...It leads to retreat into essentialist diasporic instrumentalities such as places of worship or into social collectivities, from which both the nation-state's dominant racial group as well as other diasporas are excluded. It leads to purist readings of homelands and the search for absolute ethnic states. (10)

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<sup>122</sup> The motives behind the bedroom display are unclear. Ganesh could be using this exhibit as a ploy to attract clients belonging to other religions. Nevertheless, the effort to view all faiths as equal is commendable.

<sup>123</sup> At these meetings he talks in Hindi although all the books he is reading are in English. He could be doing this in a bid of authenticity.



Even though Ganesh's trauma coerces him into "essentialist diasporic instrumentalities" and a "purist reading" of India, he does not exclude other races or religions completely. While, in Dabydeen's *The Wizard Swami*, Devan never learns to appreciate his diasporic reality, as he maintains a stubborn fervor for the motherland, Naipaul's Ganesh tries to embrace Trinidad.

Ganesh's books, speeches, newspaper and miracles both fuel and support a domestic and international movement of people.<sup>124</sup> Taxis are organized and then equipped with "a framed picture, [signed by Ganesh] issued by the Gita Press of Gorakhpur in India, of the goddess Lakshmi standing" (135). He "might have run the taxis as part of his service to the public, and not charge for it; but Leela made difficulties" and they charged "four shillings for the trip from Princes Town and San Fernando to Fuente Grove" (139).<sup>125</sup> They opened a restaurant ("a great bamboo tent"), which charged "a little extra" but catered to the clients who waited for hours to see Ganesh (141). The guru also makes collaborations with his friend, Beharry. All Ganesh's clients are instructed to buy necessary ingredients for the rituals from Beharry's shop. This of course profits Beharry, but this also initiates community development. Beharry's shop was hitherto "kept...going" only because men "gathered" in the shop to drink "a lot of bad rum," and then beat up their wives (58). The holy 'touch' that the guru provides thus rescues the community from drunk, violent men.

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<sup>124</sup> The newspaper is titled *The Dharma* (or "the faith"). Only one issue of the paper is printed. It reports Ganesh's version of occurrences in Trinidad and contains articles like "Flying in Ancient India." Ganesh is also the "business manager" of this paper, in charge of getting advertisements. The newspaper's title draws our attention to the inherent contradictions embedded in the philosophies of political-mystic leaders who mobilize masses through false notions of justice and identity. Skeptical of the concept of Dharma, Naipaul writes: "*dharma*, as expressed in the Indian social system, is so shot through with injustice and cruelty, based on such a limited view of man...*dharma* is honored above the simple rights of man" (*India: A Wounded Civilization* 142).

<sup>125</sup> Initially "more than his powers, learning, or tolerance, people [had] liked his charity. He had no fixed fee and accepted whatever was given him" (128). Sometimes he even waived the fee for those who could not afford to pay to see him.

Consolidating his power further, Ganesh builds a temple in “proper Hindu style” at Fuente Grove with the help of an Indian architect from British Guiana.<sup>126</sup> As Mearns points out:

The cultural basis of Hindu Indian identity inheres in the understandings of built structures, social space and ritual practice, and in the ‘structuring properties’ of these three domains. The social meaning of that identity is in a continual state of indeterminacy as the cultural base and the material base meet in the lives of acting, meaning-creating Indians. These Indians constantly strive to *make* their lives, and to make them cosmically sensible. (289)

The structure of the guru’s temple both provides the practicing (the active, meaning-creating) Hindu with a location within which ritual may be performed, and creates a *social* space where devotees may interact. Visitors are charged an “entrance fee,” but the construction of the temple is important on two levels. The temple puts Fuente Grove on the map both nationally and internationally, and the business generated by the temple brings economic prosperity to Fuente Grove.<sup>127</sup>

Prior to Ganesh’s arrival, Fuente Grove

was practically *lost*. It was so *small*, so *remote*, and so *wretched*, it was marked only on large maps in the office of the Government surveyor; the *Public Works treated it with contempt*; and no other village even thought of feuding with it. You couldn’t really like Fuente Grove. In the dry season the earth baked, cracked and calcined; and in the rainy season melted into mud. Always it was hot. Trees would have made some difference, but *Ganesh’s mango tree was the only one*. (57)<sup>128</sup>

Ganesh impregnates this seemingly infertile and arid region not only with a mango tree, but also with Hinduism, social recognition and economic prosperity. Before Ganesh’s activities, the

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<sup>126</sup> Desai and Naipaul’s gurus are the only ones who provide their disciples with a place to practice their faiths. Fusing the public with the private, Leela asked the builder to decorate their house too. The British Guianese temple-builder “executed a number of statues and carvings,” with two stone elephants, representing the Hindu elephant god Ganesh (144). The construction of the temple, and the similar ethnic Hindu displays also affects the land prices in Fuente Grove.

<sup>127</sup> As Hinduism consolidated in the Caribbean, the temples were not an uncommon sight: “Eventually, more durable, collective modes of Hindu worship were established in the colonies, evident particularly in the creation of temples” (Vertovec 116).

<sup>128</sup> My emphasis.

people of the village had “few thrills” and their gaiety was similar to that of a “starving child” (57, 58). However, the Public Works Department was forced to acknowledge the village’s “existence and resurfaced the road to a comparative evenness. They gave the village its first stand-pipe” (142). Ganesh’s temple also seems to have created a class consisting mainly of Hindu pilgrims who are prepared to travel any number of miles and who are willing to pay any amount of money to visit the temple. The temple begins to draw international tourists as well when the guru writes about it in *The Guide to Trinidad*.<sup>129</sup> Free copies of this book are also handed out to the American Army camps stationed in Trinidad and to “export agencies and advertising agencies in America and Canada which dealt with Trinidad” (147). All the guru’s actions illustrate his desire to connect with the world beyond the confines of Hindu Trinidad. Ganesh and Leela’s hypocrisies and their profit making ventures thus create financial (through the revival of Beharry’s shop, the creation of new businesses and the money that is now being exchanged) and social networks (through the temple, the culture of worship around it and the pilgrims) that are further strengthened by his foray into politics.

Some Indo-Trinidadian leaders embraced politics through religion, much like Naipaul’s Ganesh. Discussing Trinidadian politics, Haraksingh writes that:

Within the last two decades two apparently contradictory trends have become noticeable. The first is a growing tendency... towards religious indifference. The second is a marked resurgence of Indian cultural activity, including of course a religious dimension, especially following the Trinidad disturbances of 1970. This latter trend is distinguished by the prominent role of young persons, many of whom are clearly the products of teaching in the Hindu elementary schools. What is also remarkable about it is the ‘independence’ of activity; numerous little groups have arisen which prefer to control their own affairs and to determine their own agenda, and which seem to have a suspicion of supra-organisational structures. (178)<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> He “spoke about the romance of many races” in Trinidad and introduced the readers to his “genuine Hindu temple which looked as if it had been bodily transported from India” (147). American soldiers then: “began to pour into Fuente Grove” (148).

<sup>130</sup> By the 1950s, the resurgence of Indian cultural activity “had reasserted itself and the Arya Samajists were reduced to a mere handful of sympathizers” (Haraksingh 177).

As the orthodox Hindus increased in numbers and power, their “activity continued in the 1950s with school building and a spate of temple construction, organized celebrations of *Ram lila* and *Krishna lila* and public readings from the religious texts...And local political passions capped it all” (Haraksingh 177). The reference to the Hindu deities and their *lilas* (stories) obliterates the line between religion, reality and politics, and the success of such religio-political leaders stems from the muddle thus created. For Eastley, Ganesh’s character may have been modeled on that of Ranjit Kumar who, during the 1946 Trinidad General Elections, “posed with a bow and arrow in symbolic reenactment of the familiar Hindu drama of Ram and Seeta” (8).<sup>131</sup> Ganesh creates his political charm in Fuente Grove initially through his display of such religious authority.

### **Politicizing Hinduism**

The guru’s importance in local politics is evident for the first time when he is invited to the *panchayat* in Fuente Grove “to give judgement in a case of minor theft or assault, or to settle a quarrel between husband and wife” (149).<sup>132</sup> In the *panchayat* meetings “He came out of the taxi with dignity, tossed his green scarf over his shoulder...Then two more taxis came with his books” (149). The books testify to his learning, thus making it possible for others to believe in Ganesh’s erudition. Their recognition allows Ganesh to politicize Hinduism. By asking Ganesh to overtake some of the services of the Fuente Grove government, they are essentially acknowledging his social/cultural power and elevating him from the status of a mere mystic masseur.

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<sup>131</sup> The political atmosphere that Naipaul presents us with in this novel is a satirical portrait of the various political struggles that Trinidad faces. See Eastley for an analysis of the 1946 elections. See Ball for Naipaul and satire.

<sup>132</sup> The *panchayat* is the governing body in Indian villages.

Ganesh's support to the *panchayat* also strengthens its voice in the local community. As Vertovec writes

The 'Official' Hindu bodies became so predominant, in fact, that they became major political forces... Thus Hinduism had not only been 'Brahmanized' and 'officially' standardized, it had now become 'politized.' This was particularly the case in the years immediately preceding each nation's independence... when there were fears of political repression under Creole-backed parties. (123)

Although the events in this novel do not portray any "fears of political repression under Creole-backed parties," this was a time when ethnic tensions were high since Trinidad did not achieve independence till 1962. Prior to then, the "underlying reality of ongoing colonial control was not lost on either the people of Trinidad or on the local press" (Eastley 6). Belief in ethnic solidarity was crucial and "Indians were actively engaged to 'vote Indian'" (Eastley 9). The support the *panchayat* lends to the guru is proof of the community's attempts to create such political solidarity on religious/ethnic grounds.

To further the notion of "ethnic solidarity," Ganesh tries to establish a relationship between India and Trinidad throughout his political career. His first act as President of the Hindu Association of Trinidad is to send a cable to the All-India Congress in which he proclaims that the Hindu Indians in Trinidad support Gandhi's struggle for Hind Swaraj. Ganesh sends several other cables to India, but no acknowledgment ever appears. These repeated attempts to contact Indian political leaders, even in the absence of any response, demonstrate that initially India is Ganesh's religious/political center, not Britain. Gandhi, particularly, is an important figure in this arena, and "like Gandhi, Ganesh adopted the village as the focus of his campaign" (57).<sup>133</sup> Naipaul, however, undermines the inspiration that Gandhi provided to Indo-Trinidadian youths

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<sup>133</sup> While: "Black soldiers had returned to Trinidad after the First World War inspired by the Universal Negro Improvement Association, founded by the Jamaican campaigner and racial separatist Marcus Garvey; Indians were stirred by Gandhi's freedom movement" (French 13).

and mocks it repeatedly in this novel. Through Ganesh's failure as a guru later, Naipaul seems to voice his disapproval of M.K. Gandhi.<sup>134</sup>

Although his Indian role model rejects him, the guru does not suffer. Patrons with money often support gurus like Ganesh. The religioscapes he creates makes the guru popular, but it is ultimately money from such patrons that helps him to become a national political leader. The *Trinidad Sentinel* reported: "a Hindu industrialist in India had offered thirty thousand dollars for the cultural uplift of Trinidad Hindus. The money was being kept in trust by the Trinidad Government until it could be handed over to a competent Hindu body" (172-3).<sup>135</sup> The "culturally impoverished" Indo-Trinidadians now look to India and not Britain for culture.<sup>136</sup> The money, however, allows Ganesh and his "competent Hindu" associates to support their election campaigns: the Hindu Association president elections and the island elections. Ganesh wins the Hindu Association elections without much fuss, but it is the island elections that establish him less as a political leader and more as a messiah/religious leader.<sup>137</sup>

Like all political leaders, the guru relies on campaigning. But he is different from such leaders as his messages are religious in nature and often include the word "God." For example,

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<sup>134</sup> For Naipaul: "Gandhi really had little to offer these people. His experiments and discoveries and vows answered his own need as a Hindu, the need constantly to define and fortify the self in the midst of hostility. They were not of universal application" (*India: A Wounded Civilization* 105).

<sup>135</sup> The idea to culturally "uplift" the Hindu Indians in Trinidad may actually be a veiled effort on the part of the Hindu, Indian industrialist to evade taxes in India.

<sup>136</sup> Yet, on what terms will the "cultural uplift" occur? Who decides what "cultural uplift" constitutes of and how it should be executed?

<sup>137</sup> Through a coup that Ganesh orchestrates, the current President of the Hindu Association, C.S. Narayan, is ousted. Since Ganesh was "the only candidate for the Presidency...[he] was elected without any fuss" (184). A "bearded Negro" expresses his disappointment in Hinduism and Indians. According to him, the "corruption" he had seen at the elections was "entirely repugnant" and that he had decided "to join the Muslims and the Hindus had better look out when he was a Muslim" (183). The politics in the island abounds in such immature responses to religion. Whether this is less fact and more Naipaul's caricature, the fact remains that religion figured in the island politics and was often the fuel behind it.

during the island elections Ganesh's supporters designed posters that say: "GANESH WILL DO WHAT HE CAN, A VOTE FOR GANESH IS A VOTE FOR GOD" (187). The poster does not promise a people's leader; instead it presents a demi-god or god whose authority and power may not be questioned. This godhuman has no clear political agenda, but he "will do what he can" and that must suffice. The word "GOD" does not refer to any specific deity, and this is an advantage since the nonaligned nature of the word invites people from multiple faiths.

Gurus like Ganesh are similar to political leaders who stand for a religious cause. Hidden beneath a secular approach to politics, Ganesh has a non-secular agenda. Instead of organizing election meetings Ganesh hosts prayer meetings targeting the Hindu Indians exclusively. Ganesh hosts a seven-day *Bhagwat* where free food was served and "people came...from many miles around" (191).<sup>138</sup> The menu consists of: "rice, *dal*, potatoes, pumpkins, spinach of many sorts, *karhee*, and many other Hindu vegetarian things" (191). Ganesh wins the campaign by selling an idea—the food, the religious meetings and the prayers are the people's attempt to come close to their roots. Physical travel to India may not be possible but such meetings have the power to import the "home." *Bhagwats*, and the ideas they generate, are a part of the guru's religioscape and help to further his agenda.

The guru's ability to advertise his ethnicity proves to be damaging for Indarsingh—Ganesh's rival in the island elections and one of the more successful products of the English civilizing mission in Trinidad. Indarsingh, who had studied in Oxford, dresses in Oxford blazers and talks like a "pukka Englishman," does not really know the Trinidadian people. While Indarsingh "gave a little hop, fingered his tie, and, stupidly, talked about politics" Ganesh won the election and became "Hon'ble Ganesh Ramsumair, M.L.C" (192). Ganesh's win illustrates

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<sup>138</sup> Naipaul may have been referring to real life events here. In his essay, Eastley mentions the "seven 'lectures' to be delivered during the final week by Pundit Basdeo Misir at Hindu temples throughout the island" (9).

the masses' desire to be represented by someone who appears to be one of them, talking and behaving like them. The words "hop" and "stupidly" also reveal Naipaul's disapproval of Indarsingh's political strategy. The guru's ability to embrace his ethnicity determines his success in the election campaigns.

However, like all the gurus examined in this dissertation, Ganesh finds it hard to translate his Guruism into politics. This illustrates that perhaps gurus should not venture into politics. After he wins the island elections, Ganesh struggles to be a guru and an MLC simultaneously. Before leaving Fuente Grove for Port of Spain, to assume his new role as the MLC, he "wrenched out the Ganesh, *Mystic sign*" (199). But this:

fit of passion for the colonizer's values would not be so suspect, however, if it did not involve such a negative side. The colonized does not seek merely to enrich himself with the colonizer's virtues. In the name of what he hopes to become, he sets his mind on impoverishing himself, tearing himself away from his true self. (Memmi 121)

Ganesh's behavior, as he rises through the colonial ranks, proves that he "impoverishes" himself. He sells the house in Fuente Grove, stops wearing ethnic clothes and "dropped Indology, religion, and psychology and bought large books on political theory" (200).<sup>139</sup> In preparation for his role as an M.L.C. working for the British colonizer, Ganesh begins to undermine the role of mysticism in his success. However, as Ganesh finds out in the M.L.C. dinner, to borrow a phrase from Memmi, "within the colonial framework, assimilation has turned out to be impossible" (123).

Through his Guruism, Ganesh is able to deal with the constricting trauma of the Hindu rituals, but the insecurities that British education had earlier instilled in him are far more difficult to deal with. In recognition of the election the members of the M.L.C. are invited to a dinner at

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<sup>139</sup> For all the comedy that Naipaul weaves around Ganesh, the author does not hesitate to lament the non-mystical changes in Ganesh.



the Government House. The dinner is an “imperialist trick” designed to reveal “the new MLCs as failed mimic men” (Eastley 20).<sup>140</sup> Their ludicrous attempts to follow English table manners nevertheless encourage sympathy (Ball 50).<sup>141</sup> The meal re-wounds Ganesh who felt “alien and uncomfortable...and grew sulkier and sulkier and refused all the courses. He felt as if he were a boy again, going to the Queen’s Royal College for the first time” (197).<sup>142</sup> The humiliation is unavoidable. His preference for *dal* and curry to the English meat soup does not allow the guru to be English enough to socialize with those who govern Trinidad. Conversely, if Ganesh continues to be a guru and is unable to socialize with the English then his rise to power is nullified.

The guru’s power in Naipaul’s Trinidad is perhaps limited to his congregation alone. The colonial powers do not recognize Ganesh as a spiritual leader, nor does he have any authority as their MLC. This realization, I suggest, pushes him to adopt an English lifestyle and manners. By becoming a guru, Ganesh had re-familiarized himself with his community. As an MLC he is required to the exact opposite. Not surprisingly then, Ganesh’s friendship with Indarsingh, and the duo’s fascination with Gandhi, increases. They discuss Socialinduism—“Socialism-cum-Hinduism”—and begin to see it as a new political theory that they had invented (200).<sup>143</sup> Once in

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<sup>140</sup> But the satire is one-sided, for the Governor’s wife is not mocked: “It is as if Naipaul is saying to his British and American readership, ‘Despite any outward trappings of office, I know that if you could mix with and really come to know our politicians you would find them hilariously, and at times disgustingly, unrefined’” (Eastley 20). “In the novel the genesis of party politics in 1946 is belittled, the very notion of serious agitation in Trinidad is belied, and the lived complexities and larger nationalistic and imperial significance of island politics are severely elided” (Eastley 28). In reality the winning candidates of the 1964 election were very refined people.

<sup>141</sup> “The M.L.C.s are revealed as ludicrous mimics of an imperfectly understood elite, but on the other hand their awkwardness encourages sympathy” (Ball 50).

<sup>142</sup> The Christian Indian is the only one who is able to eat comfortably and we are invited to think whether religion is a stronger bond or nationality (196).

<sup>143</sup> Indarsingh, however, does not suffer a return to Englishness like Ganesh. While Ganesh published books about religion, Indarsingh wrote about the evils of colonialism. His essays were

sole pursuit of Hindu, Indian power, the guru now becomes a civil servant who rushes to obey every imperial order. Ganesh's religioscape catapulted him into Guruism, but the power of this religioscape is limited. For it continues to have no control over the larger political structure instituted by the colonizers.

Like Gandhi's Mahatmahood, Ganesh's Guruism begins to work against him when he is unable to understand the unique political requirements of Trinidad.<sup>144</sup> Ganesh's failure lies in his inability to deal with practical and non-spiritual problems (one of the first shortcomings of a guru turned politician).<sup>145</sup> The sugar estates strike of 1949 in South Trinidad finally shatters the guru's attempts to create and nurture an identity separate from the colonizer. Ganesh intervenes in the strike although he "knew nothing about the strike except for what he had read in the newspapers" (202). His ignorance of the actual facts of the strike and his inexperience add to his troubles: "it was the first time since he had been elected that he had to deal with a crisis in South Trinidad" (202). Unbeknownst to Ganesh, the strike-leader "a short fat man in a striped brown suit" had been bribed and had already tested the patience of the strikers (203).

Ganesh "completely missed his cue" and tried to calm the strikers armed with the writings of Thomas Paine, John Stuart Mill and Greek Political Theory. Thus becoming somewhat of an Indarsingh (the almost English, but still only a mimic postcolonial political

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titled: "The Economics of Colonialism," "Colonialism in Perspective," "The Anatomy of Oppression" and "The Approach to Freedom." He then published them in book form: *Colonialism: Four Essays*. Yet his intellectual ideas too are just "fancy talk" for a lot of people (189). Ganesh's religious phrases and ideas are more appealing.

<sup>144</sup> Just as the partition was a crisis and Gandhi's philosophy was of no use, Ganesh's mystical political theories are a failure. Although London made Gandhi realize that he was "Hindu by conviction" and that South Africa "added to this development of a racial consciousness," Gandhi's failure in India lay in his inability to bring this racial sense to the Indians (*India: A Wounded Civilization* 168).

<sup>145</sup> The Trinidadian community Naipaul grew up in "was more homogenous than the Indian community Gandhi met in South Africa in 1893, and more isolate from India" (*India: A Wounded Civilization* Foreword ix).

leader).<sup>146</sup> Ganesh fails to deal with the crisis that ensues and barely escapes a violent beating. Through Ganesh's rejection at the strike, Naipaul redeems the people of Trinidad who had blindly held onto the guru owing to a lack of alternatives. As Ganesh's friend's wife, Suruj Mooma, points out: "About religious visionaries...curing soul go do but it wouldn't put food in people mouth" (186). Ganesh's struggles with his newfound role are amplified when he perceives the failure of religion as a nation-binding agent. Ganesh's Guruism has been blind to the different classes of people—Hindu or non-Hindu. His inability to deal with the striking workers thus stems from his ignorance of the class structure in Trinidad.

His failure to curb the strike forces him to change his political philosophy immediately. Almost thoughtlessly, the guru pledged his life "to the fight against communism in Trinidad and the rest of the free world" (206). Ganesh's constant desire for India is now substituted for a longing for the colonizer.<sup>147</sup> After being dismissed initially by the Colonial Office "as an impossible agitator" (202), Ganesh is now seen "as an important political leader" (207).<sup>148</sup> To be somebody of any real power and worth, the Hindu guru was forced to adopt the colonial philosophy of governance. Prior to this he is merely a comical agitator. But it is at this same moment that he loses the support of the Indo-Trinidadians and is claimed by the very mechanism that partially contributes to his diasporic trauma: colonialism.

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<sup>146</sup> Ganesh's confusion is also evident in his choice of authors: one a revolutionary, the other an advocate of colonialism. As illustrated in this novel, the condition of mimicry is absolutely unavoidable.

<sup>147</sup> For example, while writing his first book about spirituality and his financial status weakened, Ganesh lamented that: "Now, if I was in India, I woulda have people coming from all over the place, some bringing me food, some bringing me clothes. But in Trinidad—bah!" (76). Thus suggesting that the guru figure that may be accepted in India will not be entertained much in Trinidad.

<sup>148</sup> Prior to the strike, Ganesh had tried to deal with Trinidad in his own way. He had introduced the "walk-out" which captured "public imagination," and "in no time at all Ganesh became popular throughout the South Caribbean" (200). He worked with taxi-drivers, fish vendors and others in the service industry and "exposed scandal after scandal" (201). But as he finds out, not everyone problem can be solved through his techniques.

Ganesh's hasty decision to become the quintessential colonial officer, perhaps also betrays Naipaul's nervous dismissal of Indians in general.<sup>149</sup> In the foreword to *The Mystic Masseur*, Naipaul writes: "All characters, organizations, and incidents in this novel are fictitious. This is a necessary assurance because, although its politicians have taken to calling it a country, Trinidad is a small island." Ganesh's transition is perhaps Naipaul's way of assuring himself that his assessment of Trinidadian politics, and his disappointment with the same, is accurate. Ganesh's struggle for power through the religioscape displays his manipulative nature and his shrewdness, but more importantly it shows us that political power in colonial Trinidad cannot be achieved without British approval.

The guru is successful as a civil servant when he can suppress his Guruism. Ganesh is subsequently promoted to MBE, and he moves to London. When the narrator meets Ganesh MBE, at the end of the novel, he recognizes him and addresses him as "Pundit Ganesh" (208). The narrator, however, is strongly corrected: "'G. Ramsay Muir,' he [Ganesh] said coldly" (208). Although, Ganesh seems to have given up everything he had once strived for to become powerful, the word "coldly" indicates that there is no real power in mimicry. The rejection of his comical, mystical self, simultaneous with a rejection of Indianness, leaves Mr. Muir bereft of any real warmth and emotion.<sup>150</sup> Mr. Muir is similar to his creator, Naipaul. In "his earliest reflections" on the city of London, the city remained a symbol of hope for Naipaul (McLeod

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<sup>149</sup> Referring to Beverley Nichols's *Verdict on India*, Naipaul discusses how "He [Nichols] went to India in 1945, and saw a wretched country...with no future" (French 62). Naipaul adds: "Of course the Indians did not like the book, but I think he was telling the truth" (French 62). Writing about the Indians in Trinidad, Naipaul laments, and French quotes: "We were fed Indian nationalism by people who were doing nothing about it in real life" (41).

<sup>150</sup> Transition to this mimicked Englishness was assisted by "From a starting point of ambivalent inclusions of South Asians as Commonwealth citizens in the 1960s and early 1970s, early cases showed English law keen to accommodate ethnic minority scenarios" (Menski 250).

64).<sup>151</sup> Although there is no guarantee how Mr. Muir will find hope in his Englishness, the traumatized individual is looking for “The promise of a future not seen but which ‘works’” (*The Colors of Violence* 148).<sup>152</sup> However, as is evident in his characterization of Mr. Muir, Naipaul seems to be suspicious of such a future. As Sood suggests:

Naipaul posits the Trinidadian Indian as an individual without home and as an individual who is always caught between Britain and India even though, ironically, both places are purely metaphorical and exist only in the space of emblematic representation or imagination. This distinguishes the Indian Trinidadian from the various cultural populations of Trinidad. (96)

The lack of hope is disheartening. As Kakar points out “A core attraction and vital therapeutic action of self consciously belonging to a cultural community lies in its claim to the possession of a future which, in a state of *patiens*, is felt to be irretrievably lost” (148). Ganesh’s transition into “G.Ramsay Muir” at the end of the novel denies this future and points to the conclusion that gurus can fail—regardless of how successful a religioscape they create. Ganesh’s religioscape attempted to rope in three identities—the Trinidadian, the English and the Indian. The presence of the religioscape created a “home” in the diaspora through its cultural, social, political, and financial *scapes*, but the actual home continues to be the main referral point. The guru’s failure seems to be limited to the guru alone since the religioscape he creates jumpstarts the social/political/cultural and financial networks in Trinidad.

Unlike Dabydeen’s novel, *The Mystic Masseur* does not end with the promise of a successful integration of the diaspora (Indo-Trinidadian) with the host (Trinidadian society). The mimicry of not only the colonizer, but also of the “home” is inevitable. The motherland,

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<sup>151</sup> Although Naipaul’s first trip to London in 1950 “disappointed” him (McLeod 62). Naipaul felt that “his sense of being [was] continually excluded from the City’s substance” (McLeod 64).

<sup>152</sup> When Indianness proves inadequate, the Indo-Caribbean diasporic “looked to London as their cultural centre, to which many travelled to be educated; they consequently were affected by and found themselves engaged in examining their relationship with the imperial culture” (Ramraj 218).

however, “cannot be adequately mourned (the mourning is impossible) because...[it] carries the accusing marks of the source of trauma,” and because the colonizer will not allow such a mourning (Mishra 118).<sup>153</sup> In this novel, the fascination for humiliating British manners and clothes parallels those with the constricting Indian customs, traditions and rituals. Although, through his Guruism and the religious network, Ganesh tries to bring the “home” closer, the British side clearly wins. Ganesh is rejected by the “home” (that never answers his letters or acknowledges his existence) and by the host that does not allow the assimilation of the borrowed identity from the “home,” thus forcing Ganesh to adopt the only possible alternative. This return to the hitherto colonizer for faith and a new identity—a return to Englishness that he did not desire at the start of the novel—points to the possible limitations of an ethnocentric phenomenon like Guruism. Oversimplification of a culture and its people is ultimately defeating.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Mishra is here discussing “solipsistic encounter” with the motherland while referring to *An Area of Darkness*. In Naipaul’s novel “the perpetrator of the trauma is not the system that created an empire out of tea and sugar plantations (for a European leisured class) but the motherland itself” (Mishra 118).

<sup>154</sup> My reading, to some extent, redeems Naipaul from the aloofness that he has occasionally rightfully been accused of. As Eastley notes, critics like Ishmael Reed, Al Young and Mukherjee have commented on Naipaul’s attempts to “to be an Englishman’s Englishman: icy, aloof, superior, a model of European intellect” (“Joking with the Center” 38). I suggest that in this novel Naipaul’s understanding of the struggles of Hindu diasporic life in Trinidad is acute, even as the hardships are veiled through satire and irony. Ganesh’s traumatic struggle with Hinduism during his childhood is similar to Naipaul’s own problems with the same. While Ganesh’s childhood and some parts of his adult life seem to have been modeled on Naipaul’s own, Ganesh’s mystic career closely resembles that of Naipaul’s grandfather, Kopil. The Naipauls, like Ganesh, descend from indentured laborers. Kopil was a Brahmin who migrated to Trinidad in 1894 from a village near the Indo-Nepalese border. Kopil’s caste identity spared him from the backbreaking indenture labor. When it was discovered that he could read the Hindu scriptures in Sanskrit, Kopil was asked to become a pundit. Kopil later changed his name to Capildeo Maharaj with his success. (*India: A Wounded Civilization*)

**CHAPTER 3**  
**IN SEARCH OF A DOPED “DESTINY”: HINDUISM AND GUYANA IN CYRIL**  
**DABYDEEN’S *THE WIZARD SWAMI*<sup>155</sup>**

“We forget; we have no idea of our past; it is part of the trouble.”<sup>156</sup>

Discussing his Indo-Guyanese identity in an interview in 2001, Cyril Dabydeen asserts that his “‘in-betweenness’...is a more positive response than being in a state of void and experiencing exile” (108). In Dabydeen’s *The Wizard Swami* (1985), Devan Chattergoon too occupies this “in-between” space. Devan attempts to balance his life between his present (Guyana) and his community’s past (India), and struggles to respond to his dual identity in a “positive” way. The paradoxical nature of the “in-between” space proves to be challenging, and the novel is about the conflicts that ensue when he chooses to focus on his Indian heritage.

As the son of a poor, indentured laborer in a small village Devan has few career choices. His confusion about his hybrid identity is magnified by his father’s constant nullification of their life in Guyana. Forced to continuously choose between his Indian or Guyanese identities, Devan realizes that “for the despised, listless subaltern (whose self definition rarely went beyond caste and village)...there was not going to be any collective return; promise had to be transformed into the present, into a political will for justice in the nation state itself” (Mishra 23). Devan attempts to make Guyana into the India his father repetitively mourns, and the need to Indianize Guyana stems from the impossibility of “any collective return.” As Raghuram and Sahoo write: “Imperial machinations forced diasporic identifications through racial classifications. People were often required to perform their diasporic affiliation....To be Indian was therefore to perform an

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<sup>155</sup> A version of this chapter has appeared in print on September/October 2009 in *South Asian Review* for the special issue on religion.

<sup>156</sup> V. S. Naipaul. “East Indians in the Caribbean: colonialism and the struggle for identity.”

imagined version of Indianness” (8). Devan’s “imagined version of Indianness,” however, does not involve a food stall serving authentic Indian cuisine or even a clothing store selling sarees and dhotis. To be authentically Indian, according to Devan and his followers, one cannot ascribe to any other aspect of the Indian culture (i.e. food, clothing, music etc.) and must be compelled to adopt Hinduism.<sup>157</sup> Devan thus adopts Guruism to construct the national identity of Guyana—and not only of Guyanese Indians—through Hinduism.

Guruism is fairly therapeutic for Devan, and through the guru, his disciples are able to form and act as a community, participate in local politics and envision a brighter future in Guyana.<sup>158</sup> Devan’s Guruism acts as a bridge between India and Guyana. The guru constructs networks through which he constantly attempts to cross the bridge.<sup>159</sup> Devan’s insistence on finding an identity for himself and his community through Hinduism is commendable; however, his almost fanatic emphasis on the religion makes his approach unappealing in urban Guyana.<sup>160</sup>

The guru is unable to sustain his success and authority in the city of Georgetown where political

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<sup>157</sup> Lise McKean writes, “spirituality, like commodity aesthetics, can be an instrument of domination” (5). In “A Nation in Making? ‘Rational’ Reform, ‘Religious’ Revival and Swadeshi Nationalism, 1858 to 1914” Bose & Jalal juxtapose “rational” reforms with “religious” revivals and seek to draw attention to the very different currents charting nascent Indian Nationalism and that the strongest ones seem to be defining India in Hindu terms. Since Devan is trying to mimic India, his insistence on constructing Guyana in Hindu terms is not surprising. Especially since, Devan reads Gandhi.

<sup>158</sup> Devan often expresses the desire to prove himself: first as a son, then as a husband, as a religious leader and even as a horse trainer. This desire, I believe, is an indication of his confused sense of self and his lack of confidence.

<sup>159</sup> Devan is most likely a Sanatanist: he defends orthodox Hinduism and rigorously adheres to it. R. Smith and C. Jayawardena record that Hindus in Guyana are “divided into three groups: the Arya Samaj, the Bharat Sevashram Sangh, and the residue of persons claiming to be orthodox Sanatanists” (134). While the “most active Hindu group is the Arya Samaj” all the three groups “have some measure of organization similar to that described for Muslims” (Smith & Jayawardena 134). They all “have committees of management...run schools for instructing children in Hindi and religion outside normal school hours” (Smith & Jayawardena 134). In this novel, however, no such organization or committee exists in Devan’s village.

<sup>160</sup> In *The Mystic Masseur*, the only other Indo-Caribbean novel in my project, the guru is a popular figure, much desired by both the rural and urban people. The “threat” from other races and religions is less in Guyana, as the Hindus are a majority in that country.



leaders like Sarwan Singh, who wish to assimilate with the host country, establish the Syndicate, a multiracial political party. Singh and his associates are proud to be Guyanese. They do not support Devan and refuse to ignore people of other races and religions.

Although the urban Hindus (assimilationists) are divided over the guru's philosophies, Devan's Guruism is more successful with the rural Hindus (traditionalists). According to Victor J. Ramraj: "The conflict between traditionalists and assimilationists in diasporic communities is a recurring theme in diasporic writings. Many of the Indo-Caribbean writers depict rural communities that were able to retain their cultures and traditions in the face of imperial cultural and educational assaults against them" (217).<sup>161</sup> I suggest that Devan's constant efforts to connect with "home" (India) make him a traditionalist. Yet embedded within his traditionalist attempt, I argue, is an assimilationist's effort to escape "the state of void" that Dabydeen refers to in the interview quoted above.

Devan adopts Guruism to express his Hindu identity in Guyana in an attempt to locate himself within the host society.<sup>162</sup> Although he is unable to regard Guyana as "home," Devan never considers returning to India physically at any point in the novel. He desires the connection with India and Hinduism to be only through the realm of imagination—i.e. he wants to think and talk about it, engaging with it intellectually. To that extent he introduces his community to traditional Hindu texts, Indian history and even popular Indian culture.

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<sup>161</sup> Novels like Rooplall Monar's *Janjhat* (1989) and Narmala Shewcharan's *Tomorrow is Another Day* (1994) also address this rural-urban divide. As Mariam Pirbhai notes, for "the first generation of Indo-Guyanese writers...plantation estate or village life are central concerns for the descendants of indentured labourers. Indo-Guyanese—and more generally Indo-Caribbean—writers thus tend to part company with their diasporic counterparts in their narrativization of indenture history as well as their problematization of the post colonial moment as an uneasy response to the now dominant Afro-Caribbean or Creole culture" (40).

<sup>162</sup> In the novels I examine in this project, the Hindu traditions do not just refer to Hindu religious customs. In *The Wizard Swami*, for example, food habits, clothing and even hair oil can remind one of India and these paraphernalia have become a part of Hindu tradition.

Devan's conception of Guruism, and what he achieves through it, depends on his location and the people in it. Each new setting illustrates both positive and negative aspects of his Guruism. In "The 'Bramchari' & his Inherited Past" I analyze the structure and function of Devan's Guruism in his hometown, Providence village. I suggest that his father's nervousness with the Guyanese society coerces Devan to imagine an identity that his father is comfortable with. "Cultivating Guruism" examines how Devan becomes powerful through the religioscapes he establishes in Providence village and Mahaica. "The League's Guru" and "A Doped Politics" focus on Devan's experiences in Georgetown. Devan joins forces with a religiopolitical party, the League, and becomes their guru. As the League's guru, Devan has access to all the networks, and through him the League legitimizes its activities. This section emphasizes one of my main arguments outlined in the introductory chapter of this project. Gurus today are political, and they are invaluable to political parties who play the ethnic/religious card. The public support that Devan receives as a guru convinces the Syndicate that the Guyanese Hindus want India to be a part of their identity, and it becomes crucial to incorporate tradition in their vision for a better tomorrow.

I argue that Devan's Guruism, his inability to include all races in his religious/political vision, and the communal tensions that follow, steer the Guyanese Hindus into thinking about their identities in relation to India and Guyana for the first time. Instead of lamenting about the past, the urban Hindus attempt to interact with India and actively participate in establishing a connection with their country of origin. The rural Hindus form a community as relatives and friends are reunited.<sup>163</sup> Together they are able to find strength in their renewed faith.<sup>164</sup> A new

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<sup>163</sup> Devan often does not recognize any of his relatives, as there are not many occasions to socialize (16).

<sup>164</sup> My reading differs from critics like Kean Gibson who blame Hinduism for all the violence in Guyana.

Guyana begins to emerge, one that does not reject the Indian self, but that also learns how to politically situate itself in Guyana and find strength in “in-betweenness.” The guru realizes that to successfully hold onto the Hindu traditions it is imperative to accept other races and religions that also make up Guyana. Devan’s Guruism thus both educates him and his community.

### **The “Bramchari” and His Inherited Past**

As a child, Devan struggles to balance his Indian ethnicity with his Guyanese nationality. He views Hindu traditions as oppressive, and his father, Gautum Lall Chattergoon, is partially to blame for Devan’s initial estrangement with the Guyanese of other races. Chattergoon, an East Indian indentured laborer, is constantly “assailed by the memory of his own growing up after coming from India and the hard work everyone did then to survive in British Guiana” (14).<sup>165</sup> The harsh realities of life as a low paid, racially discriminated worker do not allow Chattergoon to assimilate, and any memory of India is sweeter than the hardships endured in British Guyana. For Devan, who always witnesses Chattergoon complain about life post India, positive associations with Guyana are thus hard to achieve.

We usually learn about our ancestors from our parents. The collective history of our people is important to understanding ourselves. However, Devan, who does not know Chattergoon’s India, finds it hard to understand his father who never stops reminding him about their early struggles and their Indian connection. In response, Devan usually “sulked and kept to himself” (14). Even though he pretends not to care for his father’s ideas, Devan inherits Chattergoon’s frustration with Guyana and his nagging nostalgia for India. When he moves to Georgetown as a guru, Devan attempts to establish a similar relationship with his potential

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<sup>165</sup> He often warns Devan that he “was doomed if he didn’t learn the value of hard work from early” (14).

younger disciples by inundating them with stories about India. The Indian people, history and culture thus form the crux of the guru's lectures.

Devan also acquires his father's fears of the city and of the different races living in the city. Thus as a guru, Devan finds it hard to trust people of other races or religions, and his Guruism is only for the Hindu Indians. While visits to Georgetown and its "traffic, people, the numerous shops and restaurants, stores" excite Devan, Chattergoon is always a "nervous figure in the city" (48). Chattergoon is comfortable only in Providence village because it reminds him of rural life in India. Georgetown "was as far away as one could get from India," whereas Berbice "slow-moving, Indian populated and rice growing was not entirely dissimilar from village India" (48). Trips to Georgetown are thus few, and Devan is never allowed to develop his taste for the city—the one thing he seems to enjoy about his life in Guyana.

Georgetown, Chattergoon tells his son, is where the British Governor lived and is essentially a "white people place" (49). The mere act of walking through such a place is torturous for the father-son duo: "Devan remembered how his father had hurt his hand, so tightly had he gripped it, and how he had started crying, tired, his toes pinching him, wanting to pee as well" (49). The scared and flustered Chattergoon refuses to let Devan use the toilet. The presence of people from multiple races scares Chattergoon, while his son is amazed by difference. There were "faces all around, white, black and brown and the many shades in between, Chinese faces as well," and this was "a whole new world to him [Devan]" (49). However, the young boy never forgets his father's anxieties with this "new world," and the pain he endures because of it. Devan is not allowed to explore Georgetown because Chattergoon does not approve of an identity

beyond India. Devan's childlike enthusiasm for the city remains even as he grows older, but he also acquires a hatred of its people.<sup>166</sup>

Parallel to Devan's insignificance in the inaccessible "new world" is his negative popularity in Providence village. Devan is often the talk of the town for various embarrassing reasons. For example, the villagers always doubted his gender and "had even peeped between his legs to find out his real sex" (10). When his barber, Andar, accidentally snips off a bit of Devan's left ear, the boy shies away from barbers for good and the villagers "mockingly call him a *bramchari*, a wandering holy man with long hair" (10).<sup>167</sup> Rather than be offended by this ridicule, Devan is inspired by it since he "figured the word *bramchari* had something to do with holiness and reverence as well as loafing around" (14). The "loafing around" and the hope of "reverence" make the notion of being a Swami attractive to Devan. The positive attention is a welcome change, and the ethnic and gender crises are dealt with in one stroke. Bramcharis live according to Hindu scriptures, and if they have long hair it is in keeping with their lifestyle. Devan's appearance, identity, and vocation all demarcate him as Hindu now.

Both Naipaul's Ganesh and Devan adopt the vocation that their caste bestows on them. There are few professions in the village for Devan, and Guruism is his only medium of escape.<sup>168</sup> He had tried to assist "in Chattergoon's farm and then attempted barbering, then tailoring," but "nothing really pleased him" because he was never any good at it (20). In order to survive, however, he would have to take up a "trade," as his father constantly reminds him. The reflexive relationship that Devan forms with his utopia (i.e. Chattergoon's India) is forged through the

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<sup>166</sup> As I shall show, there is a sharp contrast between Devan the child and Devan the guru in terms of their reaction to the people of Georgetown. For Swami Devan, the other races in Georgetown are "only the denizens of hell" (48).

<sup>167</sup> Devan's neighbors bully him for his long hair and joke "that he looked like a girl" (10).

<sup>168</sup> Ganesh and Devan are Brahmins. Devan seeks a more complete/inclusive frame of reference. For Devan, religion provides that frame.

medium of religion with the help of imagination essentially. As R. Radhakrishnan writes: “Often, we cultivate the home country with a vengeance...in total diasporan ignorance...anything and everything is India according to our parched imagination: half-truths, stereotypes, so-called traditions, rituals” (128). Devan “cultivate[s]” India “with a vengeance” through his Guruism.

### **Cultivating Guruism**

Like Naipaul’s Ganesh, Devan is conscious about appearances. To be recognized as a guru, Devan has to behave like one. His community’s ignorance about gurus and religious leaders does not make this task difficult. Devan begins by starving himself and claims to have achieved “self-control,” and when his parents protest he realizes that he has a “sense of power” over them, and that he can “manipulate” them (14). His attempts to mimic the mannerisms of gurus thus lend him an unprecedented “power” and make “him feel independent” (14). In his frenzy to reach enlightenment, Devan repeatedly locks himself up to “feel the calm of being sequestered,” but quite comically, these don’t last too long because his mother “would cook his favourite [sic] dish and entice him out of the room” (15). However, these bouts of control give Devan “a strange thrill”—a feeling that arises again on his wedding day when all the attention is focused on him. Different from the negative and adverse attention bestowed on him as a child, the interest his family and the community now honor him with excites Devan as it is positively flattering.

Nevertheless, the Bramchari’s popularity is nothing compared to that enjoyed by the Tarlogie pandit who conducts Devan’s wedding ceremony. Devan transitions into being a Swami after he witnesses the pandit’s authority over his relatives and the other villagers.<sup>169</sup> Devan “couldn’t help being impressed at how he [the Tarlogie pandit] controlled his audience, how

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<sup>169</sup> This is why I disagree with McLeod when he compares Devan with Raju, from R.K. Narayan’s *The Guide*, asserting that Devan is a “reluctant Swami” (32). Apart from McLeod’s study of the novel there is not much scholarship present on this novel.

everyone looked up at him as he spoke, the power he exerted...the pandit was quoting freely from the Hindu holy texts; Devan was mesmerized, and he muttered to himself, ‘I go be a man of God; I go have a mission in life’” (18). The Tarlogie pandit is financially more successful than Chattergoon. Therefore, from Devan’s perspective, the pandit is a better role model. Before Devan met the pandit, Hindu traditions consisted only of “stupid custom, stupid custom” (16). This “stupid custom,” however, becomes his “destiny” (18). Importantly, the road Devan chooses is different from the Tarlogie pandit’s. Devan is not interested in getting people married, or performing other important Hindu rituals: “his imagination” took “him beyond the Tarlogie pandit” (18).

Situating himself as a religious/political leader, Devan educates the community about Hinduism, and teaches them to refer to Hindu principles to understand life. Unlike the Bramchari-Devan, this new Devan does not believe in wandering for personal enlightenment. Interacting with the community is far more empowering. The financial benefits are an obvious attraction, but it is the pandit’s all consuming authority that attracts Devan. For example, when the Tarlogie pandit talked, Devan watched “the elders nod[ded] sentimentally” and although “the young ones, tittered...the pandit immediately raised his voice in command” (18). As a guru, Devan can access and have control over all age groups.

The guru reaches out to his community according to their convenience. He discusses complex matters, but his audience understands him. For instance, Devan often refers to the Vedas to explain the relationship between the soul “and the necessity for it to be free” (23). The reference to the Vedas wins over the small crowd. Devan’s growing audience, and their overwhelmed awe of him stems from his assurance “that Hinduism was still integral to their lives” (22). The fear of not having any connection at all with a religion that used to be a part of

their identity is undesirable. Not surprisingly, he soon “found receptive ears and, as word got around more came” (22). Like Naipaul’s Ganesh, the ideas about religion exchanged over the village grapevine allow Devan to network with people he does not know.

To fulfill his community’s needs, Devan expands the guru’s duties and begins to act as a channel through which his disciples can reach their imaginary India. Thus “sitting in villagers’ neatly cow-dung plastered bottom-houses,” Devan talks about Hinduism and

remembering the Tarlogie pandit, affected the guise of the scholar, he pontificated, he quoted from the *Vedas*; his audience was impressed...he played upon their deepest yearnings, the same as his father’s, the same talk about India, the nostalgia and surprising forlornness...feeding their longing to know that Hinduism was still integral to their lives and was now finding an expression in serious discussion outside the Hindu temple, which only a few attended anyway. (22)

His learning and the “affected guise of the scholar” are important since both confirm his Guruism. As we have seen with Naipaul’s Ganesh, the appearance of a guru is a testimony to his authenticity. Devan does not share the “deepest yearnings” of the villagers and his father. Neither does he suffer from “nostalgia and surprising forlornness” for India. However, he understands that his audience, primarily indentured laborers, deeply long for the India they have left behind. Their desire to “know that Hinduism was still integral to their lives” shows that they constantly attempt to be closer to the “home” that they miss through Hinduism. Devan, “feeding their longing,” allow them to imagine the “home” through his speeches. Consequently, the “serious discussion” at these meetings is reassuring. Thus more than the attraction to Hinduism such passages reveal that the “talk about India” is what captivates his audience.

Additionally, these meetings remind his audience “of the Christian’s [sic]...in their churches and meeting halls” (22-3). Owing to the guru, the Hindu temple becomes a meeting ground for the faithful and provides them with an opportunity to socialize as a community. Prior to his religious awakening, Hinduism is not practiced in this South American village. Like



Chattergoon, most of the villagers struggle economically and there is no time for spiritual thoughts. After the awakening, in a village that has no sense of community and people hardly mingle with their friends or relatives, Devan creates an appreciation for belonging and togetherness. The community makes the time to listen to his thoughts about India and Hinduism. Soon Devan: “found himself covering entire streets and, on Sundays, when no one worked, they came, a dozen at a time to listen to him” (23). The “bottom-houses” become an extension of the temple and the idea of the regular Sunday meetings, not a designated day of prayer amongst the Hindus, is a clever way of using the Christian tradition of prayer to disseminate Hinduism. The guru, however, has more agency than the deities in the temple since he is able to communicate with those who seek his help.

There are no Hindu organizations in Providence village. Devan is thus the primary and sole authority on religion. Throughout the novel we meet other holy men like the Tarlogie pandit, but Devan’s Guruism has no precedence. This proves to be both a blessing and a curse for him. Brahmin priests “cannot become part of the village elite without the formal education and occupational prestige that are basic to its membership” (Smith and Jayawardena 136).<sup>170</sup> Devan, however, has no such education, but there is no one to question him. While they desire a religious leader who can reconnect them to their India, the villagers are ignorant of the books Devan discusses. Their uninformed views make it possible for the guru to rise in popularity.

During his meetings with the congregation, Devan’s lack of scholarly knowledge is clear. For example, Devan announces that Kalidas is “de greatest poet,” and follows this with a quote

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<sup>170</sup> Most of the Indo-Caribbean Hindu priests: “are of lower class origin and have little formal education, so they are unable to acquire the kind of status in the wider society that most Christian ministers acquire” (Smith and Jayawardena 136). Although Devan is not of a lower class origin, he has had very little “formal education.”

from the latter's poetry (23).<sup>171</sup> But he soon realizes that he had been quoting Rudyard Kipling instead. Initially "he was embarrassed, but then it struck him how easy it was to fool everyone" (24). His audience is unable to see through his feigned erudition since they are not educated. Nevertheless, Devan unites the rural Hindus in Providence and encourages them to think about their identities. By reminding this stagnated village about their Indian past, Devan provides them with a mirror through which to see the reflections of the present.

Since he has not seen a real guru, Devan is often confused with what and how to teach. The discussion sessions are thus not always smooth. He especially "feared the youths at the fringe of his audience...they treated him merely as a curiosity" (23). A few rural youths laugh at the idea: "expressed by some of the older, die-hard Hindus that he [Devan] might become a Hindu saint. Times had changed; they were in British Guiana, not India!" (25). The idea of a saint is more buyable in India, a land not associated with progress—almost as if progress stems from the British in Guyana. India is seen through a very colonial lens—primarily as a land of the religious where everything revolves around Hinduism. For the youth, caught in an in-between space like Devan, embracing colonial Guyana involves a rejection of the "home." This rebuff reiterates Chattergoon's position that I describe earlier—it is not possible to choose India and Guyana simultaneously. But losing either connection entails a loss of the self that is associated with a particular ethnicity. Devan's failure with the youth suggests that he may not be able to sustain his Guruism in the future.

In spite of his endeavors to help everyone, the guru continues to struggle with his own sense of placelessness. Meditation, for example, gives rise to nervous insecurities. When he closes his eyes to meditate "Buddha-style," he always imagines "the houses in the village

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<sup>171</sup> Kalidas wrote the extremely popular *Abhigyanashakuntala*. Kalidas's works are entrenched in Hindu *puranas* and philosophy, which is probably why Devan chooses him over other poets like Rabindranath Tagore.

moving, houses with legs walking away” (5). Parallel to his attempts to provide both a physical (the temple and the bottom-houses) and an imaginary (the domains of the mind and the heart that the guru educates) location for his community, is his occasional inability to find peace in his visions of India and Hinduism. Yet in Devan’s community, he is the only one everybody listens to. This explains his insistence on continuing as a guru.

Devan is often apprehensive also because he does not understand that which he appropriates. The *Mahabharata*, for instance, does not teach to disrespect women or to ignore their value in society. Devan, however, does precisely that and often mistreats his wife, Tara, who was supposed to “teach him fo’ be responsible!” (15). She doubts Devan’s mental stability, and when she leaves him, “a line from the Mahabharata floated into his thoughts, and in his anxiety he repeated: ‘Woman is an all-devouring curse’” (9). This idea stays with him throughout, and he refuses to provide the South Asian woman with any kind of role in his Hindu political worldview.<sup>172</sup> He even makes use of phrenology, which he does not know much of anyway, a pseudoscience of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries “since it often struck a chord with his own assessment of people, he saw in it a systematic base for his conclusions” (27). Devan’s Guruism is thus based on a concoction of many of his personal beliefs, and since “there is no regular training procedure for Hindu priests” in Guyana his job never gets easier (Smith 136).

However, the League, a Hindu political party, soon helps Devan. Unlike the other gurus, Devan does not struggle to create networks to spread his Guruism in the town (Mahaica) and the city (Georgetown). He uses the ones already in place by the religious/political leaders in Georgetown. Devan’s speeches and those who hear them soon spread his repute to the East Coast

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<sup>172</sup> Women remain objects for him, and he never takes them seriously. He “didn’t care so much for his daughters, Shanti and Devi; they were solely their mother’s concern” (8). Devan is sometimes attracted to other people’s wives.

of Demerara, but his membership in the League is crucial to his initial success in Mahaica. His popularity in this small town paves the way for the guru's entry into Georgetown.

### **The League's Guru**

The relationship between Devan and leaders of the League proves to be mutually beneficial.<sup>173</sup> When Pandit Gocolram, a representative of the All India League, invites Devan to join him in Mahaica, Devan is able to access a bigger audience. Devan's contribution to the League is important. As Gocolram tells him: "You's someone really devoted to our great religion, far away as we are from India; or else our Hindu brothers and sisters na talk about you so much" (29).<sup>174</sup> Devan is brought to Mahaica to exhibit his devotion for Hinduism and India. His ability to communicate with the masses and to teach them makes him a guru. Devan's talents and his obvious popularity do not escape Mr. Bhairam Bhuraji, an executive member of the league and also its biggest financial supporter.

Since he is a guru, Devan has the power to legitimize Bhuraji as a political leader. Through his acknowledgement of Bhuraji, Devan also guarantees his congregations' votes for the League. The businessman turned political leader has yet another reason to patronize the guru. Bhuraji does not possess any oratorical skills. The League is in need of a speaker to spread its philosophies at the endless public meetings and rallies. The controversies and publicities thus generated are desirable propaganda. Though Providence village is "far removed from everything," Devan had known about Bhuraji's political party since it is "referred to in

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<sup>173</sup> As McKean notes: "The heightened importance of Hindu nationalism and the religious organizations which support it relate to India's political and economic transformation into an aggressive competitor in the market place of global capitalism" (10). Spirituality was feeding off wealthy and influential followers, who were often businessmen, and who in turn were using it as a "major ideological weapon and political strategy for consolidating the power of India's ruling classes" (McKean 39). To be Indian then was to be Hindu—the other markers of Indian culture were sacrificed at the altar of spirituality and global capitalism.

<sup>174</sup> Gocolram of course has other reasons; he wanted Devan to share some of Gocolram's duties as a pundit (30).

newspapers with pictures of prominent League members shown donating money or cutting a ribbon to mark an important Hindu event” (28). Unlike the rural Hindus, the League uses mass media to construct the Hindu religioscape in Guyana. The guru’s membership in the League thus guarantees him the use of the party’s media, finance and connections.

As planned, Devan’s popularity soars and his speeches continue to be appreciated in Mahaica. He encourages the Hindus “to cherish the principles of Hinduism...to read the Hindu scriptures frequently...to teach their young...to meditate...and to shun materialistic ways” (33). Here, unlike his speeches in Providence village, Devan discusses integrating Hinduism into the daily life. At times his speeches seem to ferment a broader view of life, especially when he exhorts that: “we’re all One Big Soul, na? We are together, in the big and wide universe” (33). When he does not talk about excluding different races, he becomes popular with the youth.

The Mahaican youth honor him, and Devan is thrilled when he receives “gifts of rice, bananas, squash, and sometimes money” (34). The residents of Mahaica are not particularly rich, and their willingness to reward the guru in cash and kind is indicative of their faith in him. When word spreads that Devan is “guided by the power of God,” Hindus in other villages too invite him to speak (46). His trip to Mahaica proves fruitful in other ways as well. Devan begins a research project “about Hindus in dis part of de world. The New World... We been cut off from we roots when white people bring we from India” (27). Although religion and India are always the starting point for all Devan’s queries, this is the first time in the Indo-Guyanese community that someone has shown interest in their Indian roots. Projects that recall a common history and suffering can create a sense of unity among groups of people.

Devan is initially triumphant since: “Religious groupings may maintain a notion of community that is international, and political affiliations may likewise engender feelings of

commonality, of shared heritage, visions, and commitments, which do not depend upon place” (Massey 111). Though they are not in India, Devan is successful in establishing this feeling of “commonality” with the rest of the Guyanese Hindus. This “commonality,” however, is bound ideologically with Hindu India, and the community that Devan creates is centered on India. However, when he travels to Georgetown, Devan meets people who believe that India cannot and should not be visualized as the religious/political center. The guru, however, soon changes their perception.

Owing to Devan’s success in Mahaica, and Gocoloram’s recommendation, Bhuraji invites the guru to Georgetown to consolidate and galvanize the urban Hindu community. Devan’s talents, to connect with his audience and to unite them through religion, are invaluable to Bhuraji for a number of reasons. Guyanese history, especially between 1957 and 1963, is marked by extreme racial turmoil. Although Guyana gained its independence from the British in 1966, Guyanese politics suffered because it was modeled on “the Westminster system of government created in the United Kingdom (UK),” which had been “imposed on the colonies,” and was an “agency for perpetrating divisions” (Basdeo and Samaroo 98).

Parties and factions formed before and after independence were “based on ethnic, communal and cultural differences” (Basdeo and Samaroo 98). The People’s Progressive Party, founded in 1950 by Cheddi Jagan, split in 1955, and Afro-Guyanese Linden Forbes Sampson Burnham launched the People’s National Congress. The People’s National Congress, which was comprised mainly of communist urban Blacks, dominated Guyanese Politics till Burnham’s death in 1985. Jagan, elected President in 1992, was initially seen as pro-Indian and discriminatory towards Afro-Guyanese. However, he endeavored to correct racial imbalances in a country strongly divided by the past (Basdeo and Samaroo 117). Today, the PPP and the PNC

are the only major political parties in Guyana.<sup>175</sup> Since the political conflicts were based on ethnicity and culture they had far reaching outcomes. Race relations between the descendants of ex-slaves and indentured Indians suffered further.<sup>176</sup>

Guyanese politics, disturbed by race issues, is a reflection of its society. In a commentary in 2007 journalist Dennis Wiggins, lamenting the current state of ethnic rivalry, refers to political right's activist Tacuma Ogunseye's letter captioned "Does peaceful struggle stand a chance of achieving our political goal of shared governance/executive power sharing."<sup>177</sup> Wiggins writes that:

Ogunseye...is warning us that there are fringes in the African Guyanese community who are frustrated with the status quo and perhaps see armed struggle as an option for achieving their objectives...Indian Guyanese...will not sit idly by while the African Guyanese armed fringes wage an armed struggle on the government they voted for in a democratic process...it is imperative that ethnic groups in Guyana engage each other in dialogue and reconciliation.

Thus, although Dabydeen's novel is set in the 1980s, the Guyana of the novel is not very different from Guyana today.

*The Wizard Swami* does not exhibit fear of violence and bloodshed born from ethnic rivalry. But politics laced with religion has its own ways of enacting prejudice. Often "race relations between persons of African and Indian descent are marked by covert contempt and deceptive distrust...Each side has contrived a set of secret intra-community symbols, idioms and nuanced expressions that communicate group solidarity" (Premdas 39). I suggest that Devan's

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<sup>175</sup> The other minor parties, to name a few, are: PRP (People's Republic Party), PUP (People's Unity Party of Guyana), UPP (United People's Party), WPA (Working People's Alliance). <[http://www.caribbeannews.com/guyana\\_political\\_parties.html](http://www.caribbeannews.com/guyana_political_parties.html) >

<sup>176</sup> I am particularly thinking of the Wismar Massacres on May 26, 1964. Indian minorities were attacked. Men, women and children were butchered, and to this day there is no formal acknowledgement or apology for the fact. Today, the day is celebrated as Guyana's Independence Day. See: <[http://www.guyana.org/features/wismar\\_report.html](http://www.guyana.org/features/wismar_report.html)>

<sup>177</sup> Ogunseye fights for the Afro Guyanese and is affiliated to the WPA (Working People's Alliance). In his letter Ogunseye is concerned about the escalating ethnic violence.

accounts of Hindu mythology and current Indian politics provides Bhuraji and his supporters with “symbols, idioms and nuanced expressions” with which to convince the Indo-Guyanese of their differences from their African counterparts.

For example, Devan often reminds his audience that “in dis same Guiana we Hindus de majority, and bhais [brothers] and baheens [sisters], we still the children of India, she sons and daughters; remember dis well” (94). By asking his audience to think of themselves as the “children of India,” Devan, like his father, negates Guyana.<sup>178</sup> Whatever the sentiments attached to Guyana, they cannot be more important than the bond with “home.” Although they are not related by birth, his disciples are yoked into a similar bond. Apart from the sense of security that the family image creates, it also carries a certain amount of responsibility. Family members support each other and voters are thus more likely to choose Bhuraji.

Other minor actions by this guru enhance the League’s success tremendously. For example, Devan often constructs ideas about religious philosophy by obliterating differences between past and present. He refers “to the *Mahabharata* as if it told of recent events which had taken place in Guiana, and he talked of Arjuna, Krishna, Rama and Sita as if they were highly respected members of the All India League and of his benefactor as if he was one of that company of the deities” (93). There are lessons to be learned from the *Mahabharata*, but these may not be applicable to today’s world. However, teaching people to imagine the Hindu deities as members of the League legitimizes the League and decorates it with serious significance. Voting for Bhuraji then becomes a moral responsibility. The idea of the family and the Hindu deities as League members are the secret codes that “communicate group solidarity.” Once these

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<sup>178</sup> He quotes from the pro-imperialist English author Rudyard Kipling, from the *Vedas* and other holy books. Dabydeen does not mention exactly what Kipling Devan is reading.



images are ingrained into the minds of Bhuraji's supporters, the League's struggle for votes reduces.

The older Hindus especially approve of such religious allusions in the guru's speeches. While he is considered a fine orator, sometimes Devan is not "sure what he was saying, but murmurs of approval came to his ears, especially from the older Hindus" (94). Their consent is important since "the authority of major religious leaders' pronouncements on matters spiritual and mundane is strengthened by the social power they derive from the support of wealthy and influential followers" (McKean 11). Although they are not very wealthy, the older Hindus are extremely influential. The League provides the financial backing that Devan lacks from the older Hindus. Bhuraji and his associates cash in on the curiosity and sentiments surrounding the guru.<sup>179</sup>

In return, the guru aspires to be a member of the League, populated by rich Hindu doctors and lawyers. This membership would finally grant Devan power over Georgetown—the city he always admired, but never ceased to fear. Hinduism thus is a religious, social and a political institution that for Devan, Bhuraji and all their supporters becomes the sole means of carving a niche for themselves in a multiracial society. Formed on ethnic, communal and cultural differences, Bhuraji's (All India) League is also the only party that seems to be attentive specifically to the Indo-Guyanese. Bhuraji is an active member of his community and he "do more for Hinduism than anyone else in dis country. Christian and Muslim respect him too" (36). Bhuraji's most praiseworthy achievement is the Hindu Preparatory school which he believes will

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<sup>179</sup> Pandit Gocolram, who first brings Devan to Mahaica to meet Bhuraji, tells Devan that the rural votes matter to Bhuraji, but later when the elections have begun and Devan has already lectured in a few villages Gocolram quite innocently mentions that "only financial members are allowed to vote in League elections. Georgetown members, you know, are very wealthy" (95-6). Bhuraji seems to have unnecessarily created the illusion the rural votes matter to him most. Devan to some extent becomes a victim, a pawn in Bhuraji's project for power.

renew an appreciation of traditional Indian values and Hinduism, since: “Too many of our young people are adopting Western ways here in Guiana. Our politicians are, too. Our fathers didn’t come here for nothing” (41). The “Westerns ways” are thus considered to be incompatible with Hindu philosophy, and the prep school is their only hope that the youth will not forget their roots. As a politician, Bhuraji is a trendsetter.

The League’s prep school is important on several levels.<sup>180</sup> It is the only school that the Hindu parents trust. Premdas writes that in Guyana:

Most Indians saw the church-run schools as a cultural threat to their religious identity and therefore withheld their children. Further, Indians, most of whom engaged in full or part-time farming, utilized their children in the fields. The upshot was that by the end of the century, the Africans had come to dominate the public services at the national as well as the local level. (47)<sup>181</sup>

The Indian community’s poverty and their fear of losing their culture further the economic divide between them and their African neighbors. Devan echoes the anxiety associated with church-run schools in his speeches and frequently laments that: “Our children are not taught Hindu culture in de schools, because dese schools are run by Christians...our heritage go be lost forever in Guiana” (44). The League’s school is not a “threat” because the curriculum is designed to embrace Hindu culture and to disseminate knowledge about India.

There was yet another problem with church-run schools. Most of these schools have English curriculums. In an interview with Bryson in 2006, discussing education in Guyana, Dabydeen states that “everything [was] geared towards looking outside for our values, our

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<sup>180</sup> The prep school is almost like a Gurukul. However, the students are not required to stay with the guru—as is the case in Gurukuls.

<sup>181</sup> According to Premdas: “As early as 1925, of the persons employed in the colonial bureaucracy, 84.7 percent were listed as Negroes, while a mere 4 percent were listed as East Indians” (46).

expectations: ‘the outward gaze,’ as it’s called.”<sup>182</sup> The League and its members aim to shift the “gaze” inwards. Describing the “outward gaze” further, Dabydeen says: “We saw everything through the eyes of the colonial powers...our high school exams in Guyana were marked by Oxford and Cambridge universities...The education about Guyana itself, the local peoples, Africans and Indians and the other races, the indigenous population especially, was marginal, minuscule at best.”<sup>183</sup> The colonial/Christian schools’ ignorance of local and ethnic cultures was thus also a problem.

Bhuraji’s school plans to provide the Hindu children with an educational atmosphere that will not in any way challenge their ethnicity or religion. In the hope of “transformation” of some kind, Bhuraji hires Devan as the first teacher of the school and the latter agrees to work without a salary.<sup>184</sup> The League, however, does not plan the school well. For example, the curriculum for the school has not been well designed. Devan, who has no real qualifications to teach, is handed the charge of twenty children, thus inviting the perception that Bhuraji is not taking his school project very seriously. Since the school is only concentrating on Hindus, Devan simply starts by teaching his favorite book is M.K. Gandhi’s *Art of Living* since: “The core of ethical behavior came from India; it had to be Gandhi” (70).<sup>185</sup> Even by the late 1980s and early 1990s, during

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<sup>182</sup> He continues: “At the same time the sense of nationalism burgeoned in us, as we repudiated ‘self-contempt’ (as Franz Fanon describes the colonial mind’s neurosis), and in the flux of upheaval and change it was also the preoccupation with who we were becoming with political ideologies of East and West, North and South, all very much in our thinking. Then I was enamoured [sic] of progressive social ideals, the sense of wanting transformation; and no doubt I still am.”

<sup>183</sup> See: <<http://www.tsarbooks.com/Drums%20of%20My%20Flesh%20Reviews.htm>>

<sup>184</sup> While he drives a Mercedes and lives in a villa, the building Bhuraji finds for the school is “ramshackle... [and] a little way out of town in a seedy, run-down area” (50). The ages of the children in Devan’s class range from six to sixteen, and it is not very clear if all the children are at the same level of learning—which they are most likely not. This varied age group also suggests a nervous hastiness with which this school is being set up.

<sup>185</sup> Gandhi, often touted as the political and spiritual father of India, highlighted the importance of teaching the *Bhagavad Gita*, arguing that students would learn to react to anger and joy in the

and after the fall of Nehruvian socialism, India was being constructed only in Hindu terms. Devan's use of Gandhi in the classroom illustrates his narrow conception of education.<sup>186</sup>

Devan's task to teach Hinduism would not have been easier even if he had a specific syllabus to work with. The religion "is without a founding prophet, central sacred text, geographical focal point or institutionalized priesthood, the sizeable cluster of traditions which has come to be deemed 'Hinduism' has, until relatively recently in its long history, been without an 'official' dimension" (Vertovec 110). In the face of such uncertainty and no external help, Devan sets up the *Gita* as one of the primary texts. Yet within the Hindu culture there is no tradition that encourages children to systematically study Hinduism, and the unstable, dynamic borders of its episteme do not make it easier for those who do. Thus, as Bhuraji observes: "the Muslims, their children know the *Koran* by heart," but the Hindu children do not know their holy text (60). Devan is then a pioneer of sorts.

Devan's task is hampered also by his personal shortcomings. For example, his intolerance of difference—which he encounters in not only the members of other races but also in his own—always elicits violence in him. When the children disobey, "unable to stand this impertinence any longer, [Devan] grabbed a whip which he had hidden in his desk and lashed out, whop-whop-whop! One boy screamed and then bolted out of the hall, with Devan taking after him still

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same way. Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj*, which celebrates Hindu India, did not do much to douse communal hatred in India. His mixed message of tolerance and intolerance made the 1947 partition of India inevitable.

<sup>186</sup> Modeling the curriculum on Gandhian principles, Devan writes words from the *Gita* on the blackboard and then orders his students to "copy." He does not check to see whether they know/recognize what they are about to copy and dismisses the class within an hour, repeating the routine daily. When the children draw "horses and trees instead of copying the words on the board," Devan stares at the *Gita* and suddenly sees "the Hindi letters like weird insects running about before him" (60). While this points to the possibility that Devan might have reading disorders, it also illustrates the inherent complications within his ambitions. The guru has not received much education himself. He soon tries a more basic approach and begins teaching the Hindi alphabets, but by that time the students have no interest in the class.

lashing out blindly and shouting: ‘Baboon! Monkey! Come back here! Come back, rascal!’” (70). Devan’s restless impatience and “ungovernable temper,” often veils the minimum good that he tries to do at the Preparatory.<sup>187</sup> Under the guru’s guide, however, instead of a basic education, the children are instructed in Hindu philosophy. Since the League’s school is so exclusive, it is guilty of the same offences as the Christian school. But such schools should encourage an interaction between the races to promote peace.

At Bhuraji’s insistence the League was “beginning to make contacts with India about the education of the young,” but it is the guru’s struggles as a teacher that stir up much trouble and bring due attention to the school (60). Devan’s ideas are appreciated, but his pedagogical methods are not. After observing one of the classes at the school, Sarwan Singh forms a Board of Governors to oversee the preparatory. One of the first things the Board does is hire a Sanskrit scholar from India, Sri Aurobindo Ghose, as the principal of the school.<sup>188</sup> Ghose’s journey from India to Guyana is unlike that of Devan’s forefathers, for Ghose is a respected addition to the intellectual milieu of Guyana, not to its exploited labor population. The Indian association, which was embarrassing for the Indo-Guyanese youth who laugh at their parents’ nostalgia for India, now becomes the cause for pride.

In naming the teacher from India as Aurobindo, Dabydeen reminds us about Sri Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950).<sup>189</sup> Sri Aurobindo

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<sup>187</sup> There are also crucial differences between Devan and his idol, Gandhi. The latter wrote extensively on Christianity and Islam and was not really hostile to them, although some of his views are problematic. Gandhi focuses much of his attention on reconstructing villages, as he believes that these would lead to national advancement. Devan is always attracted to big cities and was in a hurry to get out of Providence village.

<sup>188</sup> Although Devan loses his job he still “couldn’t help marvelling at this” (73). Ghose, interestingly, is a bald, bespectacled man who wears Nehru jackets. Ghose’s apparel is seen less as a costume.

<sup>189</sup> Like Devan, Ghose read the holy texts, but he interpreted them differently. Ghose’s namesake, Sri Aurobindo, “read and reread the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the epics that

became the Vice-Principal of the Baroda College in 1904, and its acting Principal in 1905. He had earned a reputation as a professor, filling the students with deep respect... The reason for this reputation was on the one hand his ample erudition and on the other hand his disapproval of the British methods of teaching and habits of studying. (Vrekhem 114)<sup>190</sup>

Like his namesake, Dabydeen's Ghose inspires the Indian people. Gocolram, for example, wishes to follow the new recruit and become a teacher since "A principal's lot would be more fulfilling; then he would get respect from Christians, Muslims and everyone else, including the Africans" (115). However, it is also clear that both the assimilationists and traditionalists aspire to Indian role models and ideals. Singh may have objected to Devan's Hindu India oriented syllabus, but even for the forward looking, assimilationist Singh the "home" is still needed to verify the diaspora.<sup>191</sup> Thus no other teacher of Guyanese origin would have sufficed. For all Singh's genius he is only building on Bhuraji and Devan's ideas. The League has built the Prep

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even today remain alive in the heart and feed the imagination of the Hindus of all ages" (Vrekhem 106).

<sup>190</sup> Professor of English and History, Sri Aurobindo edited and contributed to two extremist newspapers: *Yugantar* and *Bande Mataram*. Sri Aurobindo is a pioneer of sorts who informed the anti-colonial intellectual milieu. As he writes about himself: "He always stood for India's complete independence which he was the first to advocate publicly without compromise as the only ideal worthy of a self-respecting nation" (from *On Himself* qtd. Vrekhem 105). He had studied in England, but when he came back to India he resisted the colonial administration. Explaining his opinion of spiritual politics, Sri Aurobindo writes that: "whereas others regard the country as an inert piece of matter and know it as the plains, the fields, the forests, the mountains and the rivers, I know my country as the Mother, I worship her and adore her accordingly... I know I have the physical strength to uplift this fallen race... with the power of knowledge" (from his *Bengali Writings* qtd. Vrekhem 113).

<sup>191</sup> This mimicry is understandable since the Indo-Guyanese community is yet to give birth to its own role models. Homi Bhabha describes colonial mimicry as "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a *subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (265). This ambivalent notion of mimicry that Bhabha uses to explain the relationship between the colonizers and colonized may be applied here to understand the identity dynamics in the diaspora. Devan and those who share his vision of an Indianized Guyana, desire to become culturally Indian, but the reality is that they will never completely be Indian. Although the diasporic individual becomes, to use Bhabha's term, a "partial" presence, diasporic mimicry in this novel is not subversive. Gocolram respects Aurobindo's Indianness and is closer to the Indian identity than the colonized Indians were to the British Imperialists.

school. The land on which the school is located, the buildings that form classrooms and the vision behind the school belong to the League. Although the less Indian Devan is rejected for the authentic Aurobindo, Bhuraji knows that there is still a market for leaders who galvanize people through their religious rhetoric, and he refuses to let the guru leave Georgetown. The section that follows illustrates the processes through which political leaders combine their power with a guru.

### **A Doped Politics**

Owing to the guru, the rural Indo-Guyanese community and parts of the urban population are charged with a renewed desire to become Hindu India. They are ready to support any cause that the guru endorses. Bhuraji hires Devan to oversee his stables and in his desperation to “fit in” and “really prove himself,” the guru agrees (75). In the previous chapter I have described a guru who controls the means through which he is portrayed to the public. This chapter, however, introduces us to a guru who loses the power to present his image. I suggest that the loss of this control is inevitable because the guru does not finance himself. Bhuraji secretly informs the media that Devan has been hired in place of Jacob Athan (a non-Hindu). Several newspapers print this story creating a huge uproar. They recognize that Bhuraji “is seeking the important post of the All India League” president and “is allowing religious sentiment to govern his horse-racing judgment” (83). The propaganda helps Bhuraji who “was trying to assure his supporters in the League that he was a Hindu all the way” (85).<sup>192</sup>

The mere attachment of Devan’s name with Bhuraji’s horses generates interest about the League and its members. Capitalizing on the controversy that the guru’s new career at the stables generates, Devan begins to move from town to town, speaking at political meetings and wooing rural voters to elect Bhuraji as president of the League. There are also significant financial profits

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<sup>192</sup> Yet again the divide in Guyana is clear. The supporters of the League want to see more of the guru.

to be made from this marriage between the guru and the businessman turned politician, and I suggest that the guru legitimizes Bhuraji's passions not related to politics/religion.<sup>193</sup> Bhuraji chooses Devan as the horse trainer for Destiny, the fastest horse in Guyana, the upcoming horse race in D'Urban Park. As I shall show, Devan's presence at the race attracts thousands of his supporters.

Different from his earlier resolve to simply teach his disciples about Hinduism, is the militaristic zeal the guru develops at Bhuraji's stables. The guru knows nothing about horses and thus focuses on the stable boys in his inexhaustible passion to remind the youth to value their Hindu traditions.<sup>194</sup> Devan wishes to convert them into the "new breed of Hindu youth: they would form the core of an *army* of Hindu workers which would spread across Guiana...his own son Jotish might be one of the young leaders, may be even taking over the Berbice battalion when the time was ripe" (85).<sup>195</sup> His vision of teaching the boys illustrates his use of religion to empower himself yet again, but it also portrays the pathos of Devan's existence—he is desperately in search of anything that will validate his existence. Excitedly he thinks that: "Such would be their transformation, all because of his teaching!" (85).

He wants to create a community here, just like the one in Providence village, and he imagined: "the boys forming a community...having regular pujas on Sundays and singing *bhajans*" (102). Far from exerting any control over the stable boys, Devan becomes a constant source of amusement to them. For example, the newspaper identifies "wizardry as part of his

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<sup>193</sup> Far greater than his passion for a Hindu Guyana, and even for politics one may argue, is Bhuraji's absolute adoration of racing horses. Curiously, at the very top floor of his house is a tower, which is made to look like a small temple. This may be Bhuraji's attempt at performing Indianness, but, as Devan notes, Bhuraji actually seems to "despise" the tower.

<sup>194</sup> He decides to set up "a plan to get the stable-hands totally under his control; perhaps he should instruct them in Hinduism" (78).

<sup>195</sup> This is a very naïve response to a sense of powerlessness and from here onwards whenever Devan is in some mental turmoil he always envisions teaching the stable boys about Hinduism and that calms him.



technique” because “the stable boys are saying” so (83). There is no “wizardry” involved. Devan only chants the horses’ names in an effort to remember them and then orders them to snort, which they invariably do not do. These newspaper articles, however, “made people all the more intrigued,” and the League became increasingly popular by extension (130). The guru’s stable experiences tarnish his reputation, although to some extent Devan manages to affect the boys.

For instance, he tells a stable boy, Punam, that: “We na belong here. White people only bring we here fo’ cut sugar-cane and wuk in rice field. We belong to India... We na come here to slave like African people” (99). Punam listens attentively to Devan because he does not know the Indo-Guyanese history, and the boy began to feel “a new-found pride in himself as an Indian” (99).<sup>196</sup> He sees Devan’s idea of Hinduism as a New World Hinduism—one that would make British Guiana “a place without strife and turmoil; the politicians might even quarrel less amongst themselves” (98).<sup>197</sup> Punam discusses this with the other stable boys, and through his insistence they begin to contemplate identity. The younger generation, however, finds it hard to see religion as a way of life, for they cannot understand its practical use.<sup>198</sup> If the guru’s teachings had been based more on facts, and less on religion, perhaps the urban youth would

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<sup>196</sup> His rant about the Indian identity is actually quite comical. Earlier in the novel he claims to have studied Indian history, but when Mrs. Bhairam discusses the British and how “our people” have “suffered” because of the British, Devan admits to himself that: “he’d never really thought of this term in relation to the few white people he’d seen in Georgetown or the white overseers from the sugar estates at Blairmont or Rosehall... He knew nothing about such people, and wasn’t sure if they were Christians or atheists” (76). Also, race matters little to Devan. He is busy dividing people on the basis of religion.

<sup>197</sup> One wonders if Devan is any different from the likes of Vivekananda—who also wanted to set up a new religion, the New World Hinduism. Revivalists like Vivekananda, however, were against any kind of religious fanaticism. For Vivekananda multiple religions could rationally cohabit in India.

<sup>198</sup> One of them asks Devan: “How can Hindu culture help us train haas, eh?” (104). Devan’s answer, Gandhi’s words “Work is sacred,” is not enough. The boys ask in return if Gandhi knew “how to train haas? Or he knew only about cow?” Gurus should be able to apply narrow religious ideas to a universal level. Desai’s guru is particularly successful at this. Devan, however, is adamantly ignorant.

have supported him. When one of the boy's argues that: "Guiana is not India. We not only have Hindus living here. We got all races an' religions mixing," it is also apparent that a revision of the Indian image is needed (117). There is thus a need for schools that enable the Indo-Guyanese youth to understand/appreciate their roots and their people.

Devan's association with the stable boys makes him think about the youth for the first time. He pictures his son, Jotish, dressed in jacket and tie sailing to England. At this moment "past and present were all one," and Devan feels "painfully disoriented" (97). Jotish could be on his way to England or even to India, but for Devan now "nothing really mattered" (97). This seemingly chameleon-like identity of his son makes Devan question his own. Through the disorientation that these thoughts bring, Devan begins to find his place. He understands that identities are fluid, and though religion is one of the factors affecting one's identity, it is not the overarching one.<sup>199</sup> Here onwards, the guru shifts in and out of his new found perception of the role of religion in people's lives.

Devan's attempts at establishing brotherhood through Hinduism begin to breakdown when he is cheated by Ganesh Lall, a businessman and Bhuraji's supporter. Lall takes Bhuraji's horse, Destiny, to a pharmacist (and not to a vet) to cure the badly trained and now lame horse. When Devan perceives Lall's real intentions, he loses faith in him. He imagined Lall "growing taller, inch by inch, taking over the room...with many hands, many faces, like a deity" (133). The guru felt that "he was being squished to smithereens" by Lall (132). Significantly, deities don't comfort Devan anymore and instead of his usual Ram and Sita, Devan sees Lall as a deity.

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<sup>199</sup> When he learns that Bhuraji's three children are in England and America, studying to be doctors and engineers, Devan begins to question Bhuraji's priorities.

This indicates a change within Devan: evil is no longer non-Hindu, as he had perceived initially, but can sometimes be a Hindu.<sup>200</sup>

This forces Devan to see that “God by any other name was the same, wasn’t it? Lord...Jehovah, Christ, Moses, Buddha, Mohammed...The psalms of Solomon and David echoed in his mind from his childhood days at school. He fought to control this turbulence of belief, faith, India and Guiana: past and present see-sawing in his mind” (128).<sup>201</sup> We have seen Devan seesaw between his past and present before. But the guru’s Hindu vision is compromised here for the first time. Perhaps this is Dabydeen’s “void,” that I refer to in the beginning of this chapter—because Devan is unable to balance himself. Neither the past not the present is empowering. Yet the social power generated by his speeches and regular newspaper articles on him continues to make the guru a celebrity.

Just before the horse races this popularity proves to be both a boon and a curse. Supporters of both the guru and Sarwan Singh decide to travel to the races: “Excitement was extremely high about the coming race meeting along the East and West coasts of Demerara. Rumour [sic] had it that the entire county of Berbice was in ferment, especially in the Corentyne district of Port Mourant where most East Indians lived (and which was the breeding ground of several notable politicians)” (120). The “ferment” is from the expectations, and as such is a positive response. Throughout the novel, Devan attempts to create community. When he meets people of other races/religions in Georgetown, he dreams of them as praying together in a Hindu

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<sup>200</sup> The stable boys, however, spread the rumor that “DEVAN DOPES HORSES” (131). When Devan discovers this, “mammoth wrath” overtakes him and his “arms swung like a windmill gone haywire” (131). Here too we see the streak of violence that Devan first exhibited in the prep school.

<sup>201</sup> Like the other Hindus in his village, Devan had learned about Solomon and David (the present) in school, and not Ram and Sita (the past).

temple. His absurd dream never becomes true, but Devan is the reason that people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds meet at D'Urban Park.

D'Urban Park had never been "so packed and with so much excitement" (138). Here, "In this interplay of races, hybrid passions spirited out of subconscious minds in loud guffaws, the emptying of a collective mind" (136). Although people took sides, discussing the protocols of racing and the role of trainers, they now seem to have formed a composite whole. Their "hybrid passions" are a proof of this unity: those "of darker hues" eyed "the supple brown-skinned women who custom had put out of their reach" (136). Throughout the novel, we do not meet members of other races, nor do we see them interacting with the East Indians. Owing to the guru, D'Urban becomes the site of a positive meeting and interaction between the races.

As Devan's understanding of religion falters, that of the Guyanese Hindus, especially those from the town and district, strengthens. They come to see the horse race in D'Urban Park since:

Swami Devan had brought Hinduism to the race. For a while, in the intense humidity of tropical South America, it seemed like a wholly new religion had been born, its centre [sic] no longer the ruminant cow, the creature suggestive of a placid heaven, but a horse...pulling the ground away from under its feet, clod of earth like huge stones flying behind it as it ran...Hindus bawled out as the rhapsody of this image gripped their imagination. (135)

The "rhapsody" of this new religious emblem stems from the power it symbolizes and thus extends to the Hindus as well.<sup>202</sup> The tranquil cow is not as powerful as the horse, which seems to be carving its own place by digging in and making its way through the earth. Devan's

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<sup>202</sup> Animals in Hinduism are seen as the vehicles for gods and goddesses. Horses pull chariots and are responsible for transporting the gods. Ancient Hindu kingdoms practiced "Ashvamedha." In accordance with the practice of Ashvamedha the King owns all the lands that the horse walks into. Whoever resists the horse, has to fight the King. Contrary to how the novel presents it, the horse may be interpreted as the symbol of orthodox Hinduism. In 1998 the BJP in India tried to reclaim the "horse" from the Aryan invaders. The objective was: "to establish that India was the sole cradle of civilization, long predating the Greeks, Chinese, Babylonians, and others" (Luce 147).

association with Bhuraji's obsession provides the Guyanese Hindus with a new image—instead of worshipping the meek cow, it is the powerful horse that is to be revered.<sup>203</sup>

In D'urban Park the guru is forced to encounter difference repeatedly. Adding to his nervous concerns about the horse race itself are the “many Africans and others of mixed race” who were “loudly applauding their favorites or heckling the opposition” (122). Both Chattergoon and Devan do not grow up with people of other races, and this is true also of their friends and family. Colonial policies in Guyana ethnically divided land thus non-Hindus did not live in Hindu majority villages like Providence Village and Mahaica. As Cross notes, that “In order to absolve the Colony from the costs of returning former indentured labourers to India in accord with their contracts, the Government instituted a number of land settlement schemes” (23).<sup>204</sup> These schemes were not made available to the Black creoles, as those in state power planned to exploit racial differences/tensions. Since land in Guyana is a scarcity such unfair policies not only gave birth to stereotypes and to racial tensions, but also to settlements that were exclusively East Indian where it would be easy to remain comfortably ignorant of the world around.<sup>205</sup>

Devan's village resembles such settlements. The residents of Providence village believe that Indianness is uniform and that all Indians are Hindus. Oddly, they don't even seem to remember life on indenture ships, which often erased ethnic divisions. David Dabydeen and Brinsley Samaroo write:

Beef-eaters were bundled together on the same ships and on the same estates with those to whom this practice was abhorrent. Low castes now became *jahagis* (shipmates)...a melting pot was created which broke down some of the barriers existing in the

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<sup>203</sup> The Muslims and the Christians side with Sarwan Singh and his party, the Syndicate.

<sup>204</sup> Cross: “The intention of the planters was, apart from merely acquiring cheap labour (from the Indians), to offer competition to the despised black Creole labourers” (19). The scenario in Trinidad was different, and there are documented cases of the two races uniting against injustices of the Colonial government.

<sup>205</sup> Guyana regularly floods from the highlands and is ravaged by the sea on the other side. The introduction of the Indians to already scarce lands thus angered the creoles.

homelands. In the new environment, Hindus could be found celebrating the Muslim Shia observance of Muharram in which even Afro-West Indians participated. (4)

Devan, and other children like him, remain ignorant of this “new environment” and constantly warp all Hindus into one category, forgetting both regional and caste differences.<sup>206</sup> Although this unites all the Hindus, his ignorance makes him vulnerable and this is why he becomes a pawn in the hands of Bhuraji.

By the time the race begins, the two horses, Destiny and Don Dinero, “had become symbols of good and evil for some of the Hindus; one on the side of Hinduism, the other on the side of all the forces of a collective evil” (134). A doped and badly trained horse cannot go far. Destiny loses the match race to Don Dinero and falls foaming in the mouth. The symbol of the dying horse is crucial and one that Dabydeen has used before. In his poem titled “Breaking Free” Dabydeen writes: “He rode his horse/pistons beating...Clouds somersault...he gallops faster...Slowly he comes to a realization,/of who he is...as the animal/suddenly snorts louder./Foam at the mouth,/the horse is folded down (245).” Like the subject of the poet Devan too “comes to a realization of who he is,” but this process is yet incomplete.

The death of the horse is a defeat for Bhuraji and his supporters, as it suggests the death of a Hindu Guyana. This does not escape Bhuraji who: “was looking at his horse and moaning as if he was witnessing a deeply personal death” (143).<sup>207</sup> Destiny’s death marks the demise of his narrow political agenda and his political career. He seems to have lost faith in himself and his cause, but this is partially good since from now on, as is evident, he will not force Guyanese Hindus to exclude difference. By showing how the two horses are instrumental in deciding the

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<sup>206</sup> However, it must be pointed out that: “the most significant socio-religious change that occurred among Hindus in the Caribbean, and one which was a prerequisite for the rise of an institutionalized and all-embracing Hindu orthodoxy, was the attenuation of the caste system” (Vertovec 119).

<sup>207</sup> In this modern, diasporic society, only his harmonium seems to provide him some recourse.

fate of Guyana, Dabydeen points to the ridiculousness that the idea of religion itself has acquired in the country.

Devan's desire to find a place for himself in Guyana, however, remains. After the horse's death, Devan holds onto his family for security.<sup>208</sup> He "held on more tightly to [his son] Jotish in the midst of the pandemonium" (140). Realizing that "there was no place really to escape," Devan mechanically chanted "Hare Ram...inaudibly" (142). The chanting is inaudible because it is faithless and mechanical. On the train back to Providence a familiar feeling grips Devan: "it seemed ... as if the land was moving, the train still, houses on stilts running away" (143). The lack of belonging that the condition of the diaspora entails continually coerces Devan to see objects and houses moving away from him. He even visualizes abandonment by his family and often sees them sailing towards "Shangrila...India...leaving him alone in the wasteland of Guiana" (77).<sup>209</sup> Guruism had been Devan's route of escape. Thus his realization that escape is impossible is in some ways proof that he has accepted his "in-betweenness."

The powerless guru, however, is quite pathetic. When Devan is about to step onto the platform in his village it "seemed to be moving, just a little, away from him" (144). In "Home and Movement: A Polemic" Nigel Rapport and Andrew Dawson refer to Gregory Bateson's

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<sup>208</sup> However, his return to his family is not a very welcomed one. His wife, Tara, is not able to forget his previous injustices. And "t[T]he thought of bearing her chafe for the rest her life made her quiver with resentment" (125).

<sup>209</sup> Devan could also be recalling a racial memory: the probable abandonment of the indentured laborers in Guyana by the Indian Government. Bhikhu Parekh writes in the introduction to Frank Birbalsingh's *From Pillar to Post*, that it was rumored that the Government of India had written to the Government of Guyana discouraging the return of indentured laborers whose contract had expired. The Government of India was already dealing with the influx of people from erstwhile East and West Pakistan. Parekh does not believe that these rumors are true. However, repatriated Indians started returning to India in 1955 and some problems did arise surrounding their claims upon lands and other property that they had left in India. Their return then was not very celebrated. See Birbalsingh, 68.

*Communication* to discuss the relationship between identity and fixity.<sup>210</sup> According to conventional anthropological understanding, Rapport and Dawson assert, the term home was used to “refer to that environment in which one best knows oneself, where one’s self-identity is best grounded ... as one deems fit ... home was tantamount to being environmentally fixed” (21). Devan always designates India as “home,” and he had hoped to approach fixity through his Guruism. Initially, “Movement was ... mythologized in anthropology as enabling fixity. As cultures were things rooted in time and space, so cultures rooted societies and their members: organisms which developed, lived and died in particular places” (Rapport and Dawson 22). Chattergoon and his community attempt to root their children in Hindu culture—which for them is the Hindu India they have left behind. Devan’s obsession with the Indian culture is his attempt to root himself in Guyana, while his networks allow the freedom to travel (through imagination) between India and Guyana.

As he discovers, however, this imaginary “home” may only be approached through Guyana. Since the people (when Devan talks to his disciples about Hinduism or Indian culture, I suggest that it brings him closer to the comfort he derives from the notion of “home”) and the networks (bottom-house community, the village grapevine his speeches travel through, the allusions to mythological and literary figures, the prep school, newspapers and the imported teacher, Ghose) in Guyana are the tools through which he connects to this home, the guru cannot negate the host. Although he does not see it, Devan challenges his father’s notion of culture as rooted in time and place. The result is that in Guyana the idea of ‘home’ now acquires “a far more mobile notion ... home ... can be taken along whenever one decamps ... And the personal myths and rituals that one carries on one’s journey through life need not fix one’s perspective on

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<sup>210</sup> *Communication* is an anthropological study of movement and relationships. Bateson, G. and Ruesch, J.



any still centre [sic] outside one's (moving) self" (Rapport and Dawson 27-8).<sup>211</sup> Ghose, for example, is the Syndicate's attempt to bring the "home" to Guyana.

The vision that the Syndicate has for Guyana recognizes difference and proposes to situate the Indo-Guyanese people firmly within Guyanese politics. Sarwan Singh's Hinduism "must play an important role in fostering an upright Hindu youth in Guiana so that all Christians and Muslims—Guianese as we all are—will see the value of our religion" (67). Referring to Ulf Hannerz, Rapport and Dawson write that the "new world system" includes within it "a new diversity of interrelations: many different kaleidoscopes of cultural combinations, amounting to no discrete wholes, only heterogeneous and interpenetrating conglomerations" (25).<sup>212</sup> By refusing to acknowledge his Guyanese identity, Devan is rejecting the "new world system"—which includes within it diverse cultures—and is thereby limiting himself to an imaginary homeland as his cognitive space.

In *The Wizard Swami*, religion, particularly that which is fraught with repression, is slowly outsmarted by politics infused with spirituality. In "Where Doth the Berbice Run" Dabydeen, discussing his childhood, writes: "now the world was indeed topsy-turvy, and religion – Christianity or Hinduism – was only a temporary salve" (452). The end of the novel illustrates the "temporary" nature of the salve that religion provides. Bhuraji inevitably loses the League elections, and Singh is elected president. The Syndicate and the League are fused as one party. The majority of the educated, urban Hindus in Georgetown do not wish to be segregated from the Muslims, Christians and Africans.<sup>213</sup> Singh's role in Guyanese politics is crucial because

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<sup>211</sup> With globalization "Movement is the quintessence of how we...construct contemporary social experience and have it constructed for us" (Rapport and Dawson 24).

<sup>212</sup> The reference is to Hannerz's (1992), "The Global Ecumene as a Network of Networks," in A. Kuper's (ed.), *Conceptualizing Society*, London: Routledge.

<sup>213</sup> As Vertovec writes: "the Hinduism which came to the Caribbean was comprised of a profusion of religious traditions determined by the heterogeneity of the Hindu migrants

unlike other South Asian diasporas the Indians in Guyana are a majority and they control much of Guyanese politics. Singh thus has the power to instruct change, but in order to avoid any misuse of power the perception of Hinduism needs readjustment. The novel's ending points to the necessity of a solution for a peaceful Guyana: Power Sharing—an issue that is still being debated in Guyana.<sup>214</sup>

Both in the Dabydeen's Guyana and the real Guyana "The transformation of Hinduism...is by no means complete...Hindus are again recognizing the viability of a diversity of devotional orientations and modes of worship" (Vertovec 127).<sup>215</sup> As Singh and Devan both prove, religion can be a valid vehicle for identity formation, and it has the ability to galvanize the masses. But the Hindu youths of Guyana need "a more 'ecumenical,' rather than unitary type of Hinduism" (Vertovec 127)—one that remembers the injustice and the history, but is also free from the burden that such memory lends.

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themselves" (114). Migrants were sometimes from the same provinces, but different districts and different castes, and were often linguistically disunited. Devan seems to be completely unaware of this. In all the speeches he delivers, he only talks about a uniform "we"—coaxing his audience to imagine the East Indians in Guyana and the Indians in India as one Hindu people.

<sup>214</sup> Robertson writes that: "Executive power sharing, where both sides share power in a multi-party government, is one solution that has presented itself, and the People's National Congress Reform (PNC/R) circulated in September a document outlining proposals for shared governance. The PPP has also published proposals of its own and the debate is now on as to whether executive power sharing is workable, and more importantly, if it can actually solve the deeply embedded social and political divisions that exist in Guyana." See also Rupert Roopnarine's "Roopnarine proposes shared governance at NDC level."

<<http://www.guyanacaribbeanpolitics.com/commentary/roopnarine.html>>

<sup>215</sup> The Arya Samaj is the most popular (Hindu) sect in Guyana today. Maharishi Dayanand Saraswati founded the Arya Samaj on April 7th, 1875 in Bombay, India. Introduced into the Caribbean in 1910, the principles of the Arya Samaj are a big challenge to the Sanatanists. Arya Samajists cite the Vedas as the sole authority on Hinduism and dismiss the caste system. However: "The majority of Indians in Guyana claim to be orthodox Hindus....A small number of these belong to Hindu reform movements such as the American Aryan League. These movements are influential but do not have a large membership" (Smith & Jayawardena 118).

**CHAPTER 4**  
**MARKETING A SEXUAL SPIRITUALITY: GURUISM IN SASTHI BRATA'S *THE SENSUOUS GURU: THE MAKING OF A MYSTIC PRESIDENT***

“Hinduism is not a religion...any writer on the subject is obliged to call it a religion, and must attempt to devise analogues that might make the phenomenon comprehensible to the Western mind.”<sup>216</sup>

“The kings of rock and roll abdicated. To Ravi Shankar and the Maharishi.”<sup>217</sup>

Sasthi Brata's *The Sensuous Guru: The Making of a Mystic President* (1980) is set in a relatively new South Asian diaspora, America. Brata's guru, Chukker, differs from the indentured gurus, Naipaul's Ganesh and Dabydeen's Devan, on several levels. Chukker becomes a guru not because he is looking for a stable identity like Devan, nor is he trying to resist any childhood traumas or colonial powers like Ganesh. Ganesh and Devan suffer the consequences of a somewhat unwilling exile from “home” (India) and adopt Guruism to ease the diasporic experience. Chukker, however, migrates from India with the desire for an American future. He sees his diasporic life as an opportunity, and Guruism becomes a dollar-minting machine.<sup>218</sup> In an attempt to survive in America, Chukker capitalizes on the obsession with oriental mysticism. Guruism, in this novel, involves marketing a lucrative sexual spirituality.

I suggest that Chukker's Guruism is successful in America primarily because of its ability to be inclusive and formless. The guru does not prescribe any holy books nor does he incorporate any fundamentalist ideas in his instruction. His philosophical and political messages are vague, and there are no set rules or regulations that the disciples are urged to follow. However, it is

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<sup>216</sup> Brata: *India* 198. My interest is not with the controversial stance on Hinduism as a religion. The responsibility to make Hinduism “comprehensible to the Western mind” is important and the responsibility is on the gurus.

<sup>217</sup> Mehta, Geeta: *Karma Cola* 6. This quote underscores the image of Hinduism as a less “serious” (therefore a fad) and more popular religion.

<sup>218</sup> Chukker, who is on a “tourist visa,” has dreams of becoming a great literary figure.

primarily the non-Vedic nature of his Guruism that heightens his popularity and ensures his several accomplishments. Unlike Ganesh and Devan, Chukker I argue is similar to a tantric guru.<sup>219</sup> Hugh Urban describes Tantrism as the “brand of Indian spirituality that...combine[s] sexuality, sensual pleasure, and the full range of physical experience with the religious life” (*Tantra* xi).<sup>220</sup> Tantrics, who often blend sex and magic, are usually very secretive about their practices. Unlike Vedic philosophy, where *Brahma* is seen as the primary creator of the universe, Tantric philosophy centers on the belief that the world is created from and dependent on *Shiva* (male) and *Shakti* (female).<sup>221</sup> The emphasis on sexual intercourse is therefore crucial to Tantrics.

Chukker’s Guruism focuses on exploring enlightenment in Tantric fashion. This journalist turned guru teaches his disciples that nirvana can be attained through sex and sensuality. Not concerned with religious philosophy like the other gurus, Chukker offers sex therapy to his disciples. His Guruism aims to sexually satisfy his disciples, who are both male and female. The guru himself does not hesitate to “cure” his female disciples through intercourse. The construction of his religioscape is based on the primacy of sex therapy and Chukker, unlike conventional Tantrics, does not shy away from limelight. The connections he establishes with his community through the media (advertisements, interviews, speeches, appearances of national television, chart topping music records); through his public relations manager, Evelyn (she introduces him to the elite American society, and the guru helps a few sexually frustrated but extremely influential socialites); through his disciples (who pay the guru

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<sup>219</sup> The argument in this chapter has two parts to it. I begin by suggesting that the Guruism illustrated in this novel is Tantric in nature. I support this analysis through an assessment of the text. The second part of my argument focuses on Brata’s subversion of the Western understanding of Tantra.

<sup>220</sup> Tantra involves “activities normally prohibited in mainstream society, such as sexual intercourse with lower-class partners, and consumption of meat and wine” (*Tantra* 1).

<sup>221</sup> I suggest that the other gurus in examined in this project practice Vedic philosophy.

for his sex therapy) and his book (which is about Chukker's initiation into Tantrism, and there are several accounts of the guru's numerous sexual adventures) allow him to rise to power.

The first section of this chapter, "Haunting America: Hinduism and Tantric Guruism," is a brief historical review that traces Hinduism in America. I suggest that Chukker's redefinition of the role of the guru stems first from his experiences and then his realization that in order to embrace a successful American life it is imperative to adopt the ideas America has about Hinduism and gurus. The second section, "Erupting onto the American Scene," surveys the spiritual market that Chukker caters to and the role that (Tantric) sex and yoga play in the lives of his disciples. Examining the metaphors in the text, I illustrate Chukker's spiritual conquest and the manner in which he constructs his religioscape. In this new diaspora, gurus are not forced to rely on village grapevines. Technology reigns supreme here: the media and the press prove to be the most powerful tools for this guru. The last section, "Inserting the Brown into the Black & White," focuses on Chukker's rise to political power. Brata, I assert, leaves little doubt in our minds that the guru's road to success would have been elusive if Chukker, or Ram Chakravarti, had not adopted Tantric Guruism.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Ram Chakravarti changes his name to Chukker: "misabbreviated...in order to cater to occidental disability in tongue twisting" (25). His new name, coupled with his Guruism, hastens his successful integration into the American society.

## Haunting America: Hinduism and Tantric Guruism<sup>223</sup>

A general interest in India and Hinduism precedes America's obsession with Tantra and seems to have paved the way for interest in sexual spirituality and the study of Tantra. In the introduction to *Eastern Spirituality in America*, Robert S. Ellwood traces the growing influence of Hindu philosophy in America and suggests that the "spiritual East is a presence that has long haunted America, in the form of its great faiths like Hinduism and Taoism, and its great sages from the Buddha to Mahatma Gandhi" (5). For some in the West, the spiritual East is an "exotic alternative," and Eastern faiths are occasionally adopted on a fanciful whim (Ellwood 6).

Although Confucianism was popular in eighteenth century America, Indian spirituality reigned in the nineteenth century primarily because it "appealed to the great turnings that marked the era: toward idealism in philosophy, toward romanticism in letters. India's popularity was abetted by the entrenchment of the British Raj, which enhanced both its fascination and its accessibility, whether through books or travel, to the English-speaking world" (Ellwood 8). Ram Mohan Roy (1774-1833), an influential Indian socio-religious reformer, abetted this American haunting and is "a major source for the Orientalism of Emerson and Thoreau, and it was through their Transcendentalist distillation that philosophical Hinduism first reached a wide American

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<sup>223</sup> In the introduction to *Gurus in America*, discussing India's "migratory expansion," editors Thomas A. Forsthoefel & Cynthia Ann Humes write that: "The recent movement to the West has been fueled not only by the migratory patterns of workers, students, and families, relocating under force of circumstance or particular personal aspirations, but the migratory patterns of gurus too, relocating with their own specific aspirations as well. This book marks what might be called the second wave of gurus in America, the first being the seminal transmission that began with Swami Vivekananda at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893" (4). Migrating gurus: "'made waves,' that is they have brought a conceptual and cultural matrix that has interfaced with a dominant American cultural matrix. Such interface has produced numerous interesting developments" (*Gurus in America* 2). Chukker is a "second wave" migrating guru who fuses the American and Indian cultural matrixes through sexual spirituality.

audience” (Ellwood 8).<sup>224</sup> This new, popular American Hinduism had less to do with gods and holy texts and was more focused on its philosophical theories about, for example, karma and rebirth.

As knowledge of Hindu philosophy became prevalent, “Spiritual seekers turning eastward now hoped less to find a rational God and a utopian social order than to share in something like Herman Hesse’s paradigmatic *Journey to the East*, a quest for sunrise lands of ultimate origins and supreme mystic wisdom” (Ellwood 9).<sup>225</sup> Mimicking Hesse’s journey, many spiritual seekers satisfied their curiosity to see the “sunrise lands” by traveling to India. However, the population enamored by Indian spirituality was still a minority, and for most “the nations of Asia were exotic and colorful...but all the same barbaric and heathen lands in which spiritual commerce ought to flow the other way in the form of Christian missionaries” (Ellwood 10).<sup>226</sup> This is primarily why those succumbing to the East were not seen in a favorable light. Eastern religions were mostly for the young and those wishing to experiment.<sup>227</sup>

Swami Vivekananda’s (1863-1902) speech at the World’s Parliament of Religions in 1893, I suggest, helped to turn this “flow” of spiritual commerce right around. In “The World; From Guru to Rogue: America Re-Examines India,” Barbara Crossette writes that:

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<sup>224</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) “participated in shifting the center of attention from China to India, and from Enlightenment to romantic and idealist styles of reacting to what the East had to offer” (Ellwood 9).

<sup>225</sup> This attitude to India is reflected in, for example, Emerson’s “Brahma,” Thoreau’s “Yankee Hindoo” and Walt Whitman’s “Passage to India” (Ellwood 9). Although the Theosophical society, set up in 1875, is not strictly Eastern oriented, its members seems to have been interested in the East, Swedenborgianism and Mesmerism.

<sup>226</sup> The American reaction to the orient and Hinduism is sometimes similar to the British Orientalists’ reactions. There is both an admiration and disgust for the East.

<sup>227</sup> As Richardson explains, in America conversions to new religions were not looked upon favorably by a number of lawmakers who thought that converting youth were mentally ill and that they should be treated. Whether or not conversion is actually a sign of mental illness, it is clear that upon conversion the personality of the converted changed drastically.

*When a vision of India first formed in the American consciousness, it was a cerebral, spiritual, inspirational one.* The Hindu reformer Vivekananda made a strong impression in intellectual circles on a visit to the United States in the 19th century. Mohandas K. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru were figures of great respect as they brought a mighty nation and old civilization to the brink of independence without violence in the 1930's and 1940's.<sup>228</sup>

Vivekananda emphasized this cerebral, spiritual and inspirational image of India in America and “contented that while India needed the material knowledge of the West, the West desperately required the spiritual wisdom India had to offer” (Ellwood 21). For Vivekananda, educated in colonial India, the East could only be spiritual; science and progress were Western prerogatives.

The responsibility that Vivekananda placed on India is substantial. According to Ellwood:

*the fundamental sociological reality of the Eastern religious groups appealing to Occidental Americans derives from their need to offer an attraction powerful enough to outweigh the normal pull of conventional religion. Against the latter's dependence on family, ethnic and community ties, and one's psychological needs for integration into those structures, the outsider must present powerful compensation. (22)*<sup>229</sup>

The “need to offer” an unconventional religion as “powerful compensation” is necessary. As

Richard Rubenstein explains:

For 400 years the American experience has involved the related phenomenon of *hope* and *mobility*. Both hope and mobility are deeply rooted in the experience of the Biblical religions...Such religion was especially viable in America because, until recently, there was always some place else to go and start over again...Now, what the new religions may be expressing is the breakdown of American middle-class optimism because mobility and expansion are now perceived as having reached their limits....The growth of the new religions thus suggests that the traditional American ways of viewing reality are no longer entirely plausible for significant sectors of the American population and that young people are most likely to intuit the diminished plausibility. (10)

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<sup>228</sup> India's Gandhian approach to the struggle against Britain colonialism, as Crossette points out, puzzled many Americans since it was non-violent and was in spiritual terms. This, I believe, created a more romantic picture of India and contributed to the fascination with the country.

<sup>229</sup> My emphasis.



Hinduism is “located” in the East—meaning that the myths and the stories that constitute the religion are all set in South Asia. Through the Hindu religious fables and tales it is possible to be transmitted to the East—even if it is only an imaginary journey. The hope and the mobility that “new religions” like Hinduism promise, I believe, partially contribute to their popularity in America. The adoption of a new religion is much like a migration, as gurus relocate their disciples into another culture through religioscapes. Since their version of this culture exists only in the gurus and their disciples’ imaginations, there is no actual dislocation.<sup>230</sup> The speed (since the movement is only conceptual) and the convenience that religioscapes entail make the mobility between cultural spaces inviting.

There is yet another “powerful compensation” that these Eastern religions provide—they introduce the disciple to “alternative social-psychological worlds” (Ellwood 22). In regards to Hinduism, the guru creates this world. The disciples of a guru are usually considered to be his family. They are encouraged to work for communal gain, instead of private gain. In ancient India, for example, young boys were even sent to live with their guru where they trained in spiritual practice but were also taught about life in general.<sup>231</sup> The social-psychological world that the guru provides allows individuals to contemplate religious philosophy as part of a community.<sup>232</sup> For American youth, especially those who do not identify with dominant social/political categories, membership in a guru’s “family” is attractive because it carries a sense of belonging, community and romance.

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<sup>230</sup> For Peter Berger, in *The Sacred Canopy* “religious conversion is a form of migration from one world, or global definition of reality, to another” (Rubenstein 9). One may be required to tweak their attire or their diet only slightly to be transported to another land. Thus there is no need to change the self to be located in another’s cultural space.

<sup>231</sup> The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* are replete with such stories. Gurus even catered to royalty, and the young sons of kings and princes often lived humbly with their gurus.

<sup>232</sup> For example, most of the devotees of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (Iskcon) are encouraged to live at the temple. Devotees work at the temple for a living and instead of wages they are provided with food and lodging.

Unfortunately for those like Vivekananda, the romance of the “new [psychosocial] world” was heightened by the “discovery” of Tantra: “the dark underbelly, the corrupt, degenerate side of the [Hindu] tradition” (*Tantra* 160).<sup>233</sup> Considering the amplified interest in Hinduism it is hardly surprising that Tantra *Sastra* could be kept hidden. Immediate attempts were made to sanitize Tantra, and Vivekananda is one of the most important figures in this regard. These purification efforts particularly intensified in

the early decades of the twentieth century, in the face of rising nationalism, political agitation, and a new desire to reimagine Hinduism in response to the Western world. If Hinduism and the Indian nation were to be defended as strong, autonomous and independent of Western control, then the foul stench of Tantra would have to be ‘deodorized.’ (*Tantra* 135)

Vivekananda’s censorship tactics essentially involve “glossing over the Tantric elements within his own tradition” (*Tantra* 147). He “promoted a strong, virile, and masculine ideal of reformed Hinduism that could meet the challenge of the West” (*Tantra* 154). This is the India we encounter in *The Sensuous Guru*, albeit through the eyes of a Tantric guru.

I argue that Brata, in a parodic inversion of Vivekananda’s efforts, presents an American society that is still well acquainted with and fascinated by Tantra. Chukker is “virile” and “masculine,” and the growing obsession with spiritual sex (i.e. Tantra) contributes to the profitability of Chukker’s Guruism. As Urban records:

in the early 1900s we find the foundation of the first ‘Tantrik Order in America’—an extremely scandalous, controversial affair, much sensationalized by the American media—and by the 1960s and 1970s, Tantra had become a chic fashion for Western pop stars, as Jimi Hendrix began (204) displaying *yantras* on his guitar and Mick Jagger produced a psychedelic film, *Tantra*. (*Tantra* 203-204)

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<sup>233</sup> Condemned by Orientalist scholars in the eighteenth century as the “most horrifying and degenerate aspect of the Indian mind,” Tantra slowly rose in popularity (*Tantra* 2). Critics like John Woodroffe, who argue that the study of Tantra is as noble and important as that of the Vedas, have contributed to Tantra’s popularity in America.

The foray of Tantra into popular American culture made it quite impossible to curtail the enchantment with Tantra. The Western preoccupation with Tantra probably stems from the Christian church's repeated attempts to repress any linkages between sex and spirituality. The church associated "sexual intercourse with dangerous power...and sexual transgression with occult ritual and obscene inversion of religious practice" (*Magia Sexualis* 21). Thus although the fusion of sex and spirituality is not a new thing for the Western world, the religious repression makes Chukker's Tantric Guruism desirable: "For most contemporary American readers, Tantra is basically 'spiritual sex,' the 'exotic art of prolonging your passion play' to achieve 'nooky nirvana'" (*Tantra* 205).

I suggest that Chukker is set up as a mirror, a dialectic image of Tantric gurus like Osho Rajneesh (1931-1990), Chogyam Trungpa (1939-1987) and Swami Muktananda (1908-1982) who achieved considerable success in America by importing the Western fascination with "nooky nirvana." As Urban points out, Tantra was "exported to the West, where it has been processed, commodified, and reimported by the East in a new form" (*Tantra* 205).<sup>234</sup> Yet Brata does not buy into this fantasy. Rather, as I argue, Brata ridicules the West's fascination with and adoption of Tantra by making Chukker, a fake tantric (since he is concerned with sex only and does not combine it with magic to gain spiritual wisdom), become a ridiculously successful guru. His American disciples are never able to see through his fake Guruism.

Chukker's success in America far surpasses that of the former advocates of Tantric sexual yoga in America. Brata's guru forms the Universal Mystic Party, wins the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for his book, *The Making of a Guru*. He bags the Nobel Peace Prize

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<sup>234</sup> See Geeta Mehta for a similar idea. Mehta, discussing the Americanization of things Indian, writes that: "Eventually we [Indians] succumbed to the fantasy that Indian goods routed through America were no longer boringly ethnic, but new and exciting accessories...From accepting the fantasies it was a very short haul to buying them and, later and more successfully, to manufacturing them" (7).

as well when he is able to stop murderous riots in New York, ultimately becoming the president of the United States. The Americanized Indian spirituality thus commodified proves advantageous to the guru and makes it possible for him to fulfill his American dreams. Chukker's Guruism grants him social mobility, as most of his disciples are influential and rich. The guru's powerful connections continuously lobby for him and allow him to control the networks through which he disseminates sexual spirituality.

### **Staking a Claim on the "Rising Stock of Instant Indiana"**

Having published only a "shrewdly telling piece" in a well-known *avant garde* magazine, Chukker is "waiting for the right moment to grab the critics by their balls. And since neither publisher nor prize dispenser was aware of this potential volcano, about to erupt any moment, our hero had to devise ways (in keeping with his lofty ambitions) of meeting inordinate needs for dollar bills and raw experience" (2). Yet writing can be time consuming, and when Chukker "met and talked with a few ecstatic devotees of oriental mysticism, he saw no reason not to stake a humble claim on the rising stock of instant Indiana in downtown Manhattan" (1).<sup>235</sup> The quickest way then to "grab the critics by their balls" is through his Guruism.

The indentured gurus too had to "devise ways" to become successful, although in Guyana and Trinidad there is no "rising stock of instant Indiana" to stake a claim on. Chukker, however, finds it easier to generate a formula for success because there were other gurus before him: "Maharishi Mahesh Yogi [for example] who had bagged Mia Farrow and the Beatles" (2).<sup>236</sup> Chukker understands the romanticism surrounding the "instant Indiana." For he:

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<sup>235</sup> The word "Indiana" does not refer to the American state of the same name. Brata is probably hinting at the bare minimum effort that the guru needs to convert India(na) to India.

<sup>236</sup> Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1914 - 2008) is known as the founder of transcendental meditation. He was guru to many celebrities in the West, including the Beatles. When the Beatles adopted him they made him a household name in America. In *Stripping the Gurus* Geoffrey Falk

had a past of which he could be proud, the glorious heritage of an old Asiatic civilization, the philosophy of the Vedas and the Upanishads. It didn't really matter if he didn't know very much about these things. Once he got really famous, he could get people to do the research for him... Then of course the PR men and the Madison Avenue boys could move in. (35)

While Devan and Ganesh do not have the luxury of "PR men" but still control the religioscape on their own, Chukker hires Evelyn Louise Teller to construct his public image. Prior to Evelyn's arrival, Chukker makes good use of the media that is within the common man's reach. For example, Chukker's first attempt to try and connect with the community is through an ad he "inserts" in *The Voice*: "GURU CHAKRAVARTI ASSISTS ACHIEVE BRAHMAN THOUGHT BY HATHA YOGA PHONE" (1).<sup>237</sup> Since he uses the newspaper as his mouthpiece, Chukker does not have to depend on the grapevine to make his existence known. He can announce himself as a guru to the community. The media is an important factor in the formation of religious networks as it allows the guru to announce himself to different communities all at once. As expected, the response to the advertisement "exceeded all materialistically oriented expectations" (2). To some extent, it is human nature to believe the written word and it is not hard to understand the obsession that these gurus have with publishing articles in newspapers about themselves or their autobiographies.

Gurus, examined in this project, understand the value of a positive self-projection. The merit of the guru itself is not that important. The extensiveness of the religioscape determines the success of the guru. Since religioscapes cannot verify the authenticity of the information exchanged, there is no stopping the guru. As we have seen in the previous chapters, gurus and their religioscapes often rely on stereotypical images. In his ad, Chukker promises a guru, and it is important that he appear like one. In preparation for his new clientele, Chukker invests in a

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discusses the gurus of the modern era. Falk's analysis of Mahesh Yogi's rise to power clearly shows that the rich funded this guru.

<sup>237</sup> Brata does not provide us with the contents of the rest of the advertisement.

“tiger-skin rug, streaks of sandalwood paste (Johnson’s Baby powder, cream and a little red ink) across the forehead, a tall bronze water-pipe (which he called a ‘hookah’) discreetly tucked away in a corner of the room, joss sticks and soft sitar music on the record player added the finishing touches to an irresistibly mystical scene” (3, 4). The “material accouterments of transcendental living” are equally important in furthering the appeal of this scene (3). This ambiance, created with the conventional Hindu objects that may be used to perform *pujas* (rugs, joss sticks, sitar music) and the fake sandalwood paste, is a formulaic depiction of India. Ironically, however, this standard representation also makes Chukker recognizable as a guru.

Unlike Ganesh and Devan who initially believe in their Guruisms no matter how skewed their views, Chukker does not attribute the same reverential seriousness to his profession.<sup>238</sup> Chukker has no qualms about using baby powder, cream and ink as sandalwood. The ease with which symbols of Hindu culture are fabricated makes it hard for the guru’s disciples to distinguish the authentic from the inauthentic.<sup>239</sup> Chukker also learns to mimic the other markers of a guru. Discussing “the initial stages of Yogic exercises,” Brata suggests that:

the Indian gurus *do* have something that most people do not have. The awesome fact is that even a novice in Yoga acquires powers that transcend the comprehension of the average Western man in the street. Practicing Yoga (of whatever variety...) certainly increases your concentration, enables you to do so in one hour what you used to do in four, hugely vitalizes your sexual appetite and prowess, and makes you remember things that others have long forgotten. (*India 200*).<sup>240</sup>

Explaining this “something” further, Brata contends that:

the exported variety of gurus reached this stage of Yogic development. And since it made them so much more powerful than other men, they exploited it. I have met some of them myself, and every single one had such a devastating rapierlike power in his eyes, and an

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<sup>238</sup> Ganesh insists on fresh ingredients for the puja from Beharry’s shop and Devan conducts his puja with a reverence.

<sup>239</sup> Whether appropriated culture is acceptable or not, Chukker seems to have mastered this art.

<sup>240</sup> Exercise does grant individuals certain mental and physical powers, but to suggest that the “average Western man in the street” would not understand Guruism further mystifies the image of the gurus. In his novel, however, Brata seeks to undo much of the mystery surrounding gurus.

extraordinary hypnotic timbre in his voice...that I was finally convinced that more than mere showmanship was involved here...What happens, however, is that the more the power is exploited (for material gains) the weaker it becomes. *How else explain the initial phenomenal success of these semiliterate bums from the unproductive hinterlands of India* in the most competitive market in the Western Hemisphere? How else explain their subsequent relative failure? (*India 200*)<sup>241</sup>

Chukker is acquainted with basic yoga poses, but he is not a serious yogi: “his acquaintance with the Yogic sciences was minimal, Hatha Yoga least of all” (1). He is not concerned with yogic development and thus is different from the “exported variety of gurus” Brata discusses. Chukker, however, is careful to practice the few poses he knows whenever his disciples are around. The guru is not “semiliterate” either, since his “knowledge of Sanskrit was modest” (1). He often parades his knowledge of Sanskrit in front of his disciples, most of whom do not know the language.

Although there is little honesty in Chukker’s Guruism, his feigned spiritual wisdom is still “exportable” because Chukker makes himself desirable—regardless of whether this desire is created through a newspaper ad, a carefully orchestrated atmosphere, the occasional yoga pose or a few couplets in Sanskrit. Chukker’s ability to advertise himself stems from his “cunning Oriental mind [which] helped the guru to come to snap intuitive assessments about the media, which left more learned and conventionally trained PR men agape with wonder” (119). This image of the Oriental mind is contradictory to the one that Vivekananda introduced to America in 1893. The guru may have limited spiritual “knowledge,” but he knows how to launch himself in a professional fashion and apparently has the technical know-how for it. Through his guru, Brata seems show that there is more to the spiritual India. Ironically, however, Chukker’s continued popularity proves that the guru is primarily desirable because of his spiritual

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<sup>241</sup> My emphasis.

“knowledge.” This suggests that regardless of how India is presented now, it is perhaps difficult to shake off Vivekananda’s India from the American imagination.

Spirituality, as Chukker presents it, seems to be more about acceptance and less about strict religious rites and rituals.<sup>242</sup> The guru, for example, does not guide his first disciple, Onan Pedarasky, into understanding some universal truth. Onan shares his name with a Biblical character who committed “coitus interruptus” and refused to impregnate his brother’s (widowed) wife (Forsyth 492).<sup>243</sup> Both the Biblical Onan and Brata’s Onan reject religious traditions that require them to fit into a mold. Brata’s Onan “had been converted from Judaism to Scientology by Ron Hubbard, then to Islam by Elijah Mohammad and finally to Upanishadic Brahmanism” (4).<sup>244</sup> Onan’s relationship with his new guru proves to be mutually beneficial. The guru and his disciple share an apartment, and most of the guru’s expenses are taken care of by Mrs. Pedarasky “who sent her son a monthly cheque [sic] of \$400” (10). The guru’s rent, telephone bill and “the large whiskies” are all paid for (10). Onan also acts as the guru’s secretary and handles his clientele. In return, Onan’s “latent literary ambitions would find its most fulfilling outlet in recording the minutae [sic] of Ram’s [the guru’s] imminent hectic life” (4). Arguably, Chukker charms his way through financial security by providing Onan with a spiritual alternative and an intellectual “outlet.”

The guru’s other clients, who are usually charged ten dollars as consultation fees, range from: “a Jewish divorcee from Brooklyn...with a limp,” to “a drop-out from Columbia University” (5, 6). I suggest that the guru’s spiritual “wisdom” is important to the seemingly

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<sup>242</sup> It grants credibility to the practicing disciple and becomes increasingly desirable because it offers individuals an escape.

<sup>243</sup> Onan is ultimately slayed for this “crime” (Forsyth 492).

<sup>244</sup> Onan, like the first set of customers/devotees that Chukker has, seems to be less human and more of an experiment. Through the figure of Onan, Brata makes us doubt whether spiritual organizations are any good. Brata also seems to be casting Chukker’s message of spirituality in the same bracket.



handicapped disciples because it grants them mobility through spirituality—without the need of any physical movement. Thus although the Columbia University dropout is aware of “Lots of these quacks” or fake gurus, he still needs “a really good guru, you know. Someone who really knows, a guy who’s *been there*” (7).<sup>245</sup> The longing to be transported to the ever elusive “*there*” is so strong that the boy is unable to see through Chukker. This yearning to be located in another culture is shared by all Chukker’s devotees. Although the guru tries to dissuade the young man from believing that such a place exists, he still misguides the boy: “it is not a place my son...It is not in space, it is not in time. It pervades eternity. You can see it in the eye of a flower, you can feel it in thunder” (7-8). The universal truth is precisely a “space” and not a place for Chukker. He impregnates this “space” with meaning, adjusting the semantics of such a space to cater to each respective disciple’s needs. Thus, while Chukker has spiritual debates with his male clients, his interaction with his female clients is different.<sup>246</sup>

Chukker’s Guruism is especially successful with the American women: “the guru was aware of his powers over the female, especially the Occidental female who generally experienced a high incidence of carnal unfulfilment [sic] and hysteria” (80). Rather than obsessing over religious philosophy like the indentured gurus, Chukker is much occupied in providing physical pleasure to his female disciples: “he had plenty to do during the day, enough Experience [sic] and whisky to imbibe in the evening and the occasional nightly cocktail of carnal execution and sublime thought of smooth slender devotional thighs leading to contemplations of Brahminic glory” (79). He frees his female disciples from their sexual

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<sup>245</sup> My emphasis. The boy understands that “creeps from the village just flock to them [the gurus] just because it’s *a fad*,” but he still desires a guru (8). Tantric Guruism in America, as Brata presents it, is also the country’s weakness, because although some of his disciples are aware of fake gurus they fail to see through Chukker who profits from this ignorance.

<sup>246</sup> All the men who read Chukker’s autobiography when it is published ejaculate helplessly as the guru instructs them into. This is recognition of Chukker’s “excellence” (178).

frustrations and provides them with “carnal gratification” (68). Ganesh and Devan do not practice Tantric Guruism and such sexual encounters are never a prerequisite for nirvana in the Vedic tradition. Chukker, however, creates a new tradition where only sex becomes an important part of the guru-disciple relationship.<sup>247</sup>

The first sexual contact he has with a disciple begins almost like a rape. A “dazzling 22-year old...draped in a sari with a *tilak* mark (a thick streak of clay running vertically down from the top of the forehead to the tip of the nose)” walks into Chukker’s office asking to be his disciple (10). Ruth, Chukker realizes immediately, does not actually want to “worship” him as she claims (21).<sup>248</sup> Unlike his other disciples, Ruth is convinced that Chukker is a Tantric. Skeptical of the non-Tantric appearance of Chukker’s Guruism, Ruth tries to tempt him by stripping in his office. Chukker’s subsequent arousal makes her come to the conclusion that Chukker is “not a Hatha Yoga man at all,” but that he is a “*tantric*” (18). Even though she initially fights him, Ruth soon begins to participate and her willing submission is indicative of her desperation. The sex makes her feel alive and important and she believes that: “Today I feel I have touched God” (25). In her appreciation she “left a cheque [sic] for the sum of \$200, made out to Guru Chakravarti” (25). Ruth christens Chukker as “Guru Chakravarti” and her acknowledgment of Chukker’s Guruism, proven by the check she gives him, denotes her understanding of what makes a guru. Although Chukker did not disseminate any spiritual wisdom to her, there are other services he has performed that qualify him as Ruth’s guru. We are never told why Ruth needs this “service.” Here onwards, however, Ruth is occasionally there only in the periphery of the narrative as one of the guru’s patrons/disciples.

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<sup>247</sup> As I have pointed out before, Tantrics focus on the joint power of magic and sex.

<sup>248</sup> Her intentions are to worship his lingam (24).

From this interaction, apart from the material gain and physical satisfaction, Chukker profits on yet another level. The “the seed of an idea” soon begins “germinating in Ram’s head for a good hour...And that night he started writing his opus” (25). I suggest that Ruth plants this “seed,” providing the guru with an “idea” that subsequently becomes the “opus,” his autobiography, *The Making of a Guru*. With the power that Ruth bestows on him, both monetary and creative, Chukker is able to write the entire opus in one night and then: “he fondled the freshly devirginated sheets [of paper], still raw with the hammerings from the typewriter keys. He read and re-read the whole opus and finally retired to bed, with thoughts of glittering days and psychedelic nights gyrating in his head” (69).

Using the typewriter, Chukker in turn impregnates the sheets with his ideas. Chukker’s power to impregnate, nevertheless, has come from Ruth—just as the ideas about the spiritual East sometimes come from the West. The newfound authority, however, is empowering and the guru decides to “plough the field, a while longer, till the day finally dawned when he could throw it all up for the real vocation in which he had been groomed; the professional writer, the TV raconteur, the Park Avenue connoisseur” (36).<sup>249</sup> Chukker can now be anything he wants. The freedom to choose has been possible only because of the various “services” he performs as a guru.

Sexual metaphors like “plough the field,” “insert,” “explode,” “gyrating,” “hammered” and “thrust” are found throughout Brata’s novel. This is perhaps in keeping with the masculine image of Hinduism and India that Vivekananda had created, and which I refer to in the start of this chapter. Chukker is powerful and his power comes from his abilities to plough, insert, explode, impregnate and so on. This image of the authoritative and influential Chukker is

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<sup>249</sup> Other than just being a Hindu from India, Chukker is also a Brahmin. To some extent, Guruism is then his (caste-given) birthright.

interesting because it hints at a reverse colonization of sorts. The East is no longer feminine and the West does not have complete control.<sup>250</sup> Chukker's conquest is different from Devan's and Ganesh's because his target audience is the Western world, and not South Asians. Yet the processes through which he conquers their imagination is not very different. His plan of attack is simple: "He would have to appear in a national magazine first, then on one of the TV networks in a special late-night show, then his book would come out" (46). All the gurus I have examined understand this trajectory, following it very closely, with only minor differences. For example, Ganesh and Devan did not have to consider using the television to propound their ideas. Their primary focus is on the books they write (perhaps because the communities they help/target do not have access to such technology). Chukker too writes a book and it helps him get his message across. But since no one shows any interest in his literary skills, his book cannot be his primary means of communication with the American public or the international world. For Chukker, fame comes from the popularity of his sexual spirituality.

Chukker's ethnicity limits the roles he can play. Always on the lookout for methods of showcasing his literary talents, Chukker takes invitations to social events seriously. Parties, like the ones hosted by "The Society of Literary Friends" in Manhattan, allow Chukker to introduce his book through casual talk. Before the pleasantries begin, however, Chukker is bombarded by questions about his ethnic identity. The guests, for instance, wanted to know if Chukker is Indian. An affirmative answer leads to several questions that reveal the stereotypical ideas that Chukker's questioners have about India: "Do you shoot tigers in India?," "You're a Knight, aren't you? Do you live in a castle?" (40, 42). He is asked other offensive questions, and it is

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<sup>250</sup> Together with the sexual metaphors to describe Chukker's Guruism, Brata also uses some conquest metaphors. Chukker is always planning to launch an "attack" and he has specific "targets" (172). Chukker: "decided to unleash his meditative, mystical and related powers on that area of town south of 14<sup>th</sup> street" (3).

clear that Chukker is expected to fit into the circus clown-like picture the party guests have of Indians.<sup>251</sup>

At every such assault/insult, Chukker rushes off to get a drink. Finally, “*Powered* by his fifth (or was it the seventh?) astringent Martini, [Chukker] discoursed recklessly, disclosing his Brahmin origins, distributing his address and phone number, deftly hinting at his impending greatness” (42).<sup>252</sup> He stops running away from each offensive questioner only to come back with full throttle, and “powered” by alcohol he embraces his Brahmanism almost revengefully, becoming what they desire him to be. Chukker’s inability to carve an identity independent of his ethnicity, or the ideas that the West has about his ethnicity, stifles his literary dreams. The guests do not want to hear about Chukker the writer, but they are more open to Chukker the future spiritual leader—the promise of this latter possibility got him this party invitation in the first place. As Chukker realizes, Guruism is his only path to rapid success.<sup>253</sup>

### **Erupting onto the American Scene**

Chukker is the only guru who hires a publicist with connections. Evelyn Louise Teller knows “most of the publishers socially...[and] one or two Hollywood movie producers...[and] the television networks” (73).<sup>254</sup> Perhaps Chukker’s Guruism is more successful than Ganesh and

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<sup>251</sup> Yet others praise Africa for its “primitive vitality” (40).

<sup>252</sup> My Emphasis.

<sup>253</sup> He meets his next disciple/patient at the party: a forty-six year old poet. She knew he wanted to be a writer and offered to help Chukker, since she has “considerable position in the community of letters here in New York” (43). However, she does not help Chukker and after several days it is painfully clear that she wanted sexual favors for him and had nothing to offer in return. Chukker is misused and his literary career never takes off till he becomes a guru.

<sup>254</sup> Chukker’s access to such influential people may be attributed to Teller whom he employs for the purpose, but his success with these people draws attention to the marriage of powerful families with politics, and to the control that such families exert over culture by setting trends for the nation to follow.

Devan's because of his reach (through Evelyn) into the other scapes.<sup>255</sup> As she informs him: "Respectability is a great thing in this country. Wrap up a piece of turd in a box from Tiffany and even Jackie Kennedy will begin to drool" (81). She helps to "wrap" him up and introduces him to Judy and Hank Goodman. Judy's "father is the Chairman of the National Book Award Committee this year," and Hank's "family own half of Raymond and Baxter, the Publishers. And they have one of their Directors on the Committee too" (138). I suggest that Guruism is a necessary desire here—liberating for both parties involved.

Judy's support helps Chukker to win the National Book Award. Through Hank, Chukker releases a music record. The lyrics of the songs are never discussed, but Chukker's "most effective publicity came from the song sessions on the Campuses" (203). One of the songs in this collection becomes a chart topper and "buttons with GURU FOR PRESIDENT and A PEACE ON YOUR SOUL were sold to more than 5 million people" (203). Judy, in return, needs the guru to satisfy her sexually, and Chukker fulfills her wish to be a mother by impregnating her.<sup>256</sup> While Naipaul's Ganesh cures disciples by merely touching them, Chukker claims to be able to transfer some kind of power from himself to his devotees just by looking at them. Chukker woos Judy thus:

Ram lifted both his hands high above her head and held them there for some ten seconds. And then he brought them down on each side of her shoulder. Then slowly, very slowly, with a touch as soft as a feather, his fingers glided down her bare arms, while lips intoned, 'Ohm Shantih! Ohm Shantih! Ohm Shantih!' in his most somber, hypnotic voice. (145)

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<sup>255</sup> As I shall show, in the chapter that follows, Desai's guru goes a step further in creating an ashram which functions like a state. In her case, there is no question of conquering the media or the press as she has complete power over the state—the mechanism that generates, controls and guides these channels of communication.

<sup>256</sup> Judy's relationship with her husband, Hank, is not good. The couple is not physically intimate either.

Judy is affected by this touch and begins to believe that “there was someone here” (146). She develops “goose-pimples” and Chukker too “felt a Presence” (145, 144). The “Presence” that Chukker and Judy feel is important. For Chukker this validates his Guruism and confirms the fact that he does have an inexplicable, perhaps supernatural, impact on people. For Judy, whose physical and emotional relationship with her husband seems to be nonexistent, Chukker’s touch is immensely reassuring. She announces that she is now “free” and that she would not be going to the “Goddamn shrink anymore. I don’t need a crutch. I can walk by myself” (147). Although Judy fails to understand, Chukker does indeed become a crutch for her and as her relationship with him progresses we see how much she craves his company.<sup>257</sup>

The primary difference between a guru and a shrink, as evidenced in this novel, is the shrink’s professional distance from the patient. The guru, on the other hand, prides himself on knowing his disciple well. In Chukker’s case, the guru is even sexually involved with the patient. Through the sexual gratification he provides Judy, he manages to save her from possible insanity. The indentured gurus occasionally catered to reluctant populations. Chukker’s Guruism, however, evolves and the guru is now also a successful shrink. The effect is clear: the next morning Judy “was as chirpy as a cuckoo in spring” (147). As a payment for his services Judy adopts his autobiography, and her father makes sure that Chukker is awarded the National Book Award. To be eligible for the award, Chukker has to be an American citizen. His PR manager, Evelyn takes care of that since her father “knows the top man in the State Department” (85).

With a growing success through the established networks, Chukker’s power over the media increases. For example, during his interview with the editor of “RESQUIE” (a popular magazine) Chukker basically tells them what to write: “You must write about my religious,

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<sup>257</sup> Chukker’s other disciples too complain about the shortcomings of shrinks (38). The main complaint seems to be that shrinks don’t care. The guru’s personal involvement with his patients, on the other hand, creates the illusion that Chukker cares.

literary and political life” (89). The editor does exactly that and, in addition, publishes pictures of Chukker: “every single celebrity in town had been inundated with photographs of the guru, in profile, in standing up, sitting cross-legged, about to enter the john...etc” (56). This of course ensures that Chukker is visibly recognized whenever he makes public appearances. Large numbers of people gather around the guru simply out of curiosity, and the sight of the sheer numbers of people adds to the guru’s credibility.

Owing to Evelyn’s father’s connections, “ACROPLIS” [sic], a respected and conservative publishing house, decides to publish *The Making of a Guru*: “Ram Chukker was about to explode over literary New York and, by extension, over the whole of the North American continent” (118).<sup>258</sup> Chukker “erupt(s)” both literally and figuratively onto the American society through his book. *The Making of a Guru*, seems to be a calculated move. Often religioscapes rely on controversy to increase the rate at which information is disseminated. The guru’s autobiography, through which he celebrates his Tantric roots, shocks the entire nation. In his book, Chukker makes it clear that his mother, who repeatedly had sex with him with his father’s acknowledgement, summoned him into manhood. As Chukker puts it, he held “carnal congress with his own mother” (84). Not surprisingly, Chukker’s autobiography arouses intense curiosity and his book is nominated for the National Book Award.<sup>259</sup> Chukker’s initiation is

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<sup>258</sup> Till the book is launched, Chukker has plans to stay away from the limelight, because: “The thrust must be intense” (119). His absence feeds his charisma. The book is incredibly successful and is translated into every European language. This broadens the guru’s fan base (196).

<sup>259</sup> Chukker never talks about this in his past. Much of that information is revealed only in his book. This ensures that the curiosity surrounding his book is not dampened.



different from that of the indenture gurus.<sup>260</sup> The book proves Ruth's suspicion, Chukker is a Tantric (a phallus worshipper who practices dark spiritual spells and charms).<sup>261</sup>

*The Making of a Guru*, unlike the books Ganesh and Devan write, is not just Chukker's account of his past. The book requires readers to actively participate and not just read. Through the book, the guru urges his readers to masturbate as they read about the "carnal congress" and about the guru's initiation rituals. The book, as we learn, provides pleasure to many. Without even meeting with them, Chukker converts thousands of people. In return, the guru requests financial support. The book is thus not only the guru's channel for initiation, but it also becomes a financescape. The last chapter of *The Making of a Guru* urges his disciples to "pick up your cheque book, sign your name at the bottom and make it out to The Guru, New York City and post it to me in this very instant" (68). This payment also ensures membership into Chukker's fold and helps his cause: "I have to convert the whole world, pass the message around, bring peace and tranquility and carnal gratification to hundreds and millions of people all over this planet and others still to be explored...I need money, dollars, pounds, yens, marks, liras, pesetas...the Guru is waiting for you" (68). Whereas Dabydeen's Devan relies on the merchant, Bhairam Bhuraji for financial support, Chukker is quite the entrepreneur who understands that a hefty financial investment must precede a sound control over the media and other networks.<sup>262</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> The unconvincing ridiculousness of his account makes him credible to those who expect him to have such a past. Brata is perhaps caricaturing the American perception and understanding of Tantric Guruism.

<sup>261</sup> This is also in keeping with my argument. As I have stated earlier, Chukker's path to enlightenment is that of a Tantric's. In fact, as Chukker reveals in the book, he had been educated in "The Erotic School of Tantrik Art' in a village in the foothills of Nagaland" (63).

<sup>262</sup> In *The Making of a Guru*, Chukker makes himself appear like God. As he writes in his autobiography: "In my physical being I embody Eternal Truth, Cosmic Consciousness and the fundamental nuclear particles...I am not only the *second* coming, but an infinity of comings" (26). Here he juxtaposes Hindu thought with Christianity. Hindus believe that God repeatedly comes to earth in various avatars or forms. He avoids questions about his claims, by requesting for suspension of disbelief (28).

Chukker and Evelyn's efforts to build sound networks to disseminate the guru's message are made easier by the universal content of the messages. Chukker understands that: "Hindu traditions...also present real social barriers to outsiders, and old religious identities can die hard. One suspects that the *mahagurus* knew this; even though their teachings cannot help but be Hindu in spirit, they are frequently not explicitly so in name" (Gold 225).<sup>263</sup> Chukker never introduces himself as a Hindu guru, and he welcomes people of all races and religions. While Desai's guru is also inclusive of difference in her vision, her focus remains on the mind and the individual's rise to enlightenment. Chukker, however, encourages enlightenment that can be achieved or experienced through the physical body. Thus the lack of any explicit association with Hindu philosophies proves beneficial to him. The neutral nature of his messages is instrumental in his career as a political leader.

### **Inserting the Brown into the Black and White**

The guru is not desirable just because of his philosophies on sex and spirituality, although that is what makes him popular initially. Evelyn's job to introduce Chukker to the political arena becomes easier when the New York riots take place. Brata's account of the riots serves to highlight the community's need for Chukker. The guru's ability to stop the riots and the subsequent popularity fans his political ambitions.<sup>264</sup> It all begins with a comment—"Eldridge Cleaver-type speech, replete with suggestions of physical violence"—made by a "Negro student," and several incidents that were seen as direct repercussions of that comment (153). The New Jersey State College split on racial lines: "The Campus erupted and all the Negro students became more militant than they had ever been" (154). Extreme bloodshed followed, as more

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<sup>263</sup> The *Mahaguru* is Gold's term for gurus who are very popular and have large followings.

<sup>264</sup> Interestingly, Rajneesh was in trouble because the Rajneeshes (the name with which his disciples are called) tried to invite thousands of homeless people from all over America into their ashram and this was seen as a veiled political move by Rajneesh to play with votes and capture political power (New York Times).

students from both races got involved. Other minorities too got sucked in: “Adjoining New York went up in flames. It started in Harlem where a student of Columbia University—a Negro—organised an expedition to ransack the shop of a Jewish grocer” (154). Violence soon spread from the colleges to the communities:

From this point all semblance of rationality disappeared from the confrontation. The original cause for the onset of violence was forgotten. The students no longer constituted the only defiant flank of the populace. A direct either/or battle was declared between Jew and black, Irish and black... Within a week New York was plunged into a surrealistic inferno. (157)

Brata presents the Western world as irrational, ignorant and chaotic.<sup>265</sup> Rationality must come from the East—through Chukker. Although entering the political arena was not much of a challenge for Ganesh and Devan, the duo found it difficult to accept difference and therefore struggled as leaders.

Chukker’s Guruism, however, disregards cultural and ethnic differences, and the guru: “spanned both worlds, the white and the black. Ram [Chukker] was accepted by the Black Panthers at N.Y.U. and he began to be invited to Pukka WASP parties in the Upper East Side” (45). His existence becomes a requirement as he bridges two races in a country where that connection is much needed. As Brata suggests, the relationship between blacks and whites is always charged with tension, and only the “Indian Savior” could act as a mediator (46).<sup>266</sup> Chukker thus “occupied a position of privilege because of his racial origins” (44). The guru’s English education, evidenced through the “Oxford vowels that came lisp[ing] out and expressions such as ‘bloody’ and ‘old chap’...left [no one] in any doubt about his cultured pedigree and ancestral influence,” makes him appear “cultured” (45). Thus his postcolonial condition proves valuable to the guru.

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<sup>265</sup> But he deploys a racist stereotype to do so—since the black students start the riot.

<sup>266</sup> Chukker is also often preventing the Anglo Saxon male from getting into any sort of altercation with the Anglo Saxon female. America cannot seem to function without him.

Well-equipped with his English education and his Tantric backgrounds, Chukker “addressed an Open Letter through the pages of the EVO,” asking “the Mayor [to] delegate *full executive powers* to the guru, with a view to settling the whole rancid affair [the riots and the racial hatred]” (161).<sup>267</sup> Unable to control a violent situation, Mayor Guernsey is essentially forced to give up his position.<sup>268</sup> The power exchange occurs over national television: “In a historic speech...the Mayor of Gotham City temporarily offered his office” (161). In his desire for maximum exposure, Chukker orders Evelyn to “hire Madison Square Gardens, announce a meeting to be held in two days time and advertise both on Television and in the Press” (161). Yet again, the media works to Chukker’s advantage as this broadcast ensures a large gathering at the meeting.

However, the guru distinguishes his authority from that of the state as he refuses to borrow the state’s muscle power. When Chukker arranges for the meeting and invites all races, he makes it clear that he does not want the “cops” there (162). Chukker is essentially a one-man army; such is the all-encompassing power of a persona created by the media. Gurus and political leaders are charismatic and both have access to the masses in much the same way. Thus the Mayor too has access to the media, but Chukker’s success that follows points to the possibility that spirituality can be a more powerful unifying force than political dogmas. Chukker uses his Guruism to resist the state’s power, and he does so using the media. The guru’s challenge to the state on national television introduces him to rest of the country.

The neutral content of Chukker’s speech also grants him an upper hand over any political leader with a clear administrative agenda. Chukker’s audience does not have to choose between

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<sup>267</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>268</sup> The Mayor is unable to fulfill his political “duties” and Chukker steps in to take control. This reminds us of the inability of the Anglo Saxon men who are unable to satisfy their women. Chukker is required to “save” not only American women, but also America and he resolves the issue with an easy deftness.

democrats or republicans because the guru has a different plan: “Come with me, my fellow toilers, and we will plough this garden till the weeds are plucked, the foul soil thrown away and there are freshly blossomed flowers in a new dawn to herald the coming of a new day” (162). The sexual metaphors perhaps indicate that the promised union between the races may occur on several levels. Convincing the youth that he would bestow on them “Peace that passeth understanding,” he invites them to join The Universal Mystic Party so as to “build a new New York, a new America, a new world” (165).<sup>269</sup> He plays on his audiences’ love for “mobility” and “hope” by assuring them a “new dawn” and a “new day.” Chukker’s ability to win over his audience simply through fancy rhetoric points to yet another aspect of his power. The guru has the license to sell peace as a valid political plan/agenda. No one questions him about it, not even when he announces his intentions to run for President (of America).

Chukker’s ability to understand the multifaceted histories of people and his repeated acknowledgement of individual ethnic struggles are precisely what makes him charismatic. At the Madison Square Gardens’ meeting, the guru does not stop with the promise of spiritual peace. He addresses each race individually: the whites/blacks, the Irish, and then the Jews. He urges whites and blacks to “make Peace not war, we sell love not soap flakes” (163). Applying his knowledge of Indian history, Chukker finds common grounds with the Irish and the Jews. To the Irish he claims: “I know your sorrow, I know your pain. For the men who plundered and dominated you for hundreds of years did the same to me and the people among whom I was born” (164). The evils of colonization are ironically now a boon for Chukker. To the “children of Israel” he said: “I come from a country where one branch of your family has lived for over two thousand years, in peaceful harmony...But in other parts of the world, you have been persecuted, imprisoned and killed” (165). More than a spiritual alliance, Chukker manages to establish

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<sup>269</sup> This reminds me of some of President Obama’s speeches.

political and historical connections. He does not want to be their guru because he understands the philosophy of life, but because he has a similar story, a past. The guru's speech in this meeting makes it clear that his knowledge of Hindu philosophy is not required anymore to keep the masses under his control.

Although sometimes "his utterances were not even specifically political," the guru "attracted a large following, mostly among the young" because he is able to provide his audience with the hope for a better tomorrow (113).<sup>270</sup> Additionally, his vague political philosophy makes it hard to categorize the guru in the political spectrum: "the guru promised the world but ne'er a sausage. There were no concrete proposals, plans of action or any of those tedious mundane things. But the audience was impressed with his authority and respected his command" (166). The newness of the category makes Chukker's vision attractive, and his charismatic personality cloaks the lack of a political philosophy. A *New York Times* article, that covered the Madison Square Gardens' meeting, writes about the guru's message of "Peace" to the assembled youth: "the message was unequivocal and infused with intense proselytising zeal. This young man from India, dressed in Oriental costume...was going to solve all problems that beset mankind simply by touch or miraculous oration" (104). Chukker never explains how he intends to "solve all problems." The guru tends to lump different kinds of people into one category. His speeches are never about women's rights or unemployment, and "all the problems that beset mankind" are not homogenous. Paradoxically, however, by combining his disciples into one category, the guru is able to unite them.

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<sup>270</sup> The desire for hope is universal and is tied to man's need to believe that he is an important being in God's created world. The yearning for hope is so strong that if it is not quenched, the craving is perpetual. This is why gurus come and go, and the search for spiritual alternative is exhausting but endless.

Chukker's amazing control over the violent rioters makes people believe in him. Much of a guru's power comes from the faith that disciples bestow on him.<sup>271</sup> As Brata points out: "Other men at other times have also possessed this quality [charisma]" (166). Brata's list of "Other men" includes the likes of Lenin, Jesus Christ, Gandhi, Shaw and even Adolf Hitler. Not all of these men had good intentions. Chukker, like these well-known leaders, has the power to sway large populations although he mainly desires power for himself. Thus, although his messages are vague, the audience's zeal for hope is such that Chukker manages to get loud, appreciative roars from them (109). Guruism now transitions: from soft power over small sections of the American people to real political power as Chukker dreams of acquiring control over the entire nation.<sup>272</sup>

This transition is made possible by the guru's growing, unprecedented popularity: "even Marlon Brando would not have turned as many faces as Ram Chukker did" (169).<sup>273</sup> When he becomes the President, Chukker has absolute power over the country: "such an event" is achievable only because "the Press" is "free and the media so accessibly amenable" (222). Chukker's rise to power is thus through his control over the networks that he pays for (these are created by Evelyn) and that is free (the media and the press). Although the guru politicizes the masses, he does not allow them any power over him. Chukker's Guruism is not about the individual's ability to gain enlightenment, but it is based on the guru's skill to grant them the

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<sup>271</sup> The media, the articles and other networks through which the guru's ideas and life is disseminated also present us with a false sense of closeness with the guru.

<sup>272</sup> Soft power is different from military, political or economic power. The ability to employ soft power depends on its acceptance by the receiving audience. Soft power can be wielded through culture, religion, etc. and "many of its crucial resources are outside the control of governments" (Nye 1). The power that Chukker initially wields over his American disciples is soft power. They are attracted to his Guruism, and are not forced into it. See Joseph Nye's *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. Guruism in this novel is an exercise in soft power, and to control this power, Chukker has to be connected to the community at all times. Thus the media and the press always prove to be valuable tools for him.

<[http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/files/joe\\_nye\\_wielding\\_soft\\_power.pdf](http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/files/joe_nye_wielding_soft_power.pdf)>

<sup>273</sup> His photos that the media circulated before make this possible.

same. By establishing such a relationship with his disciples Chukker ensures that all power remains in his hands.

His next meeting is much like a rock concert: full of young hopeful, but vulnerable people where the energy is high and “The boys began bellowing out their lungs and rolled around on the grass in epileptic frenzy” (110). The guru does not seem to have a calming effect on the youth, and the “euphoria” and the “epileptic frenzy” of the youth should not only be indicative of Chukker’s ability to inspire. As Brata explains in *India: Perpetual Paradox*:

the kind of descriptions of *reality* that one finds in the later Upanishads...bear a startling congruence with the type of experience induced by the hallucinogenic drugs, such as lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), dimethyltryptamine (DMT) and mescaline...Because hallucinogenic experience is essentially nonverbalizable, the young men and women who took the drugs found the ancient Hindu scriptures to be the nearest accounts of their mental, emotional, and psychic states, which were so wildly divorced from the mundane realities of their immediately recognizable Western world. They sought refuge in a species of Hinduism, with *sadhus* and gurus, which appeared to offer them some external paradigm with which they could compare the enormous upheavals going on inside their heads. (208)

Chukker’s Guruism seems to attract different types of spiritual seekers. There are those who are genuinely interested to hear what he says, and then there are those who are on drugs that find Chukker’s words to be electrifying.<sup>274</sup> However, to their credit, most of the youth who express their desire to be his disciple, or who support him, are all acquainted with Hindu scriptures—courtesy all the other gurus/swamis who came before Chukker.<sup>275</sup> Although these gurus are not his inspiration, their success guarantees that of Chukker’s Guruism.

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<sup>274</sup> We cannot say for certain whether the youth in this novel are on drugs or not when they were at his meeting, but the frenzy and euphoria they exhibit are certainly interesting. The above excerpt does explain why Chukker’s Guruism was attractive to mainly the youth and the subsequent craze surrounding it. In his novel *Traitor to India*, Brata touches on a similar theme. The main character attains enlightenment after he goes on an LSD induced trip for sixteen hours.

<sup>275</sup> As I have mentioned earlier in this chapter, prior to Chukker there is Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Yogi Gupta and other guru led Yoga societies.



Religioscapes, as I explained in the introduction, are essentially networks through which images and concepts are mass-produced and disseminated in a uniform fashion. Chukker not only relies on the media (mediascapes), but his disciples also support him (financescapes). The success with these scapes make it possible for him to conquer the ideoscape (through his book) and the political arena. As these ideas circulate, the charisma and curiosity surrounding Chukker soar: the “benediction and the euphoria was unmistakable” (104). Once the guru has power over the people through the religioscapes, it is very hard to suppress him. For example, although for sometime “No other paper carried the news,” and “No one took the guru seriously,” everyone seems to be paying attention to him (104, 105). Even when media reviews are not always positive, articles about Chukker enhance his growing popularity.

When the *Village Voice* publishes an interview with him, the state finds it hard to control the traffic of people outside Chukker’s apartment: “A steady stream of people was climbing the stairs, entering the guru’s apartment...By 10 p.m. the television crews had arrived, along with policemen, journalists and plainclothes FBI agents” (103). The speed with which such news articles or interviews abet the guru’s power is astounding. The obviously negative reviews end up creating awareness about him. The number of people who continue to visit the guru is proof of the effect all the news videos and articles are having on the people. I suggest that Chukker rises beyond his religioscape and does not need to rely on it to fuel his Guruism. Here onwards, the guru’s charisma and his control over his disciples increase tenfold.

However, unchecked power can be a dangerous thing. Chukker’s desire for authority and control soon threatens the mobility (sexual and spiritual) that he grants them as a guru. Ironically, the peoples’ faith in guru Chukker’s guidance makes them vulnerable to Chukker the (almost) dictator politician. At a party that the magazine “RESQUIE” hosts to celebrate the final

issue of *The Making of a Guru* clearly highlights the guru's power over the minds of his disciples. At the party:

the guru would be clad in saffron robes and encaged in a sealed, transparent, hemispherical bowl, made of fibre glass, supported on a flat platform on wheels. Thus there would be no possibility of any tactile contact between him and any of the guests. Locomotive power of the vehicle would be provided by batteries, direction and speed being controlled from within by a series of levers. There would be a self-sufficient system of Oxygen feed and Carbon Dioxide rejection, to ensure proper breathing. The sound system would be partially unidirectional and radio operated. On entry, each guest would be provided with a miniature microphone which would only pick up sound if the guru pressed the appropriate button inside the capsule. While, in contrast, every word the guru uttered would be broadcast over speakers throughout the Hall (126).

The word "encaged" suggests that the guru is some sort of an exotic creature who is paraded around at the party. This is true to some extent, but the power dynamics show that Chukker is in control of the situation. Although the disciples are given a microphone, none of them can speak to Chukker, until he wants them to. Not only the "locomotive power," but also the power to divide and organize his guests lies in his hands.

True to his Tantrism, Chukker separates his guests according to their sex. The party invitation requires all guests to be in masks and "See through material, waist downwards for gentlemen; see through material, waist upwards for ladies" (123-4). Entry to the party is dependent donning the proper attire. From a guru who celebrates free will, Chukker seems to have become a despot of sorts who sets new social norms and determines how to dress, how much to talk and who to talk to. The guru has the option to turn off a guest's microphone. Like the gurus in *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, Chukker becomes almost omnipotent. This power was not there when he initially became a guru. The media (the advertisements, music records, articles, television shows) constructs his persona, and now he has become bigger than the networks he had once used.

The guru is of course exempt from the dress code at the party because it would be unfair to the largely Anglo-Saxon male guests to witness Chukker's "superior article" [his male genitalia] for it would be like "rub[bing] salt on the open wounds of many" (125). The engaged guru now becomes the spectator who "amused himself by gazing at the numerous hillocks encased in fine gauze of transparent silk. In contrast, he was saddened to note the average size of the anglo-saxon phallus. No wonder the women felt starved. Even the color was so insipid, a kind of bloodless pink" (129). The guru's power over the people at the party, as is obvious, does not stem from any kind of scriptural/spiritual knowledge.<sup>276</sup> Chukker's "hemispheric bowl" allows him to occupy a privileged position from which he can clearly see his disciples and their intimate body parts, but they cannot see him. The guru's guests are the real prisoners.<sup>277</sup> Each microphone at the party is numbered, and each number provides the guru with information as to the identity of the person, since everybody is in mask. Thus while others will not recognize each other, Chukker recognizes and knows all.

Far from empowering his disciples, the guru actually renders them powerless. Even the Mayor is made subservient to him. The Mayor asks if Chukker is "comfortable" in the bowl, and Chukker replies: "Very much, thank you Mr. Mayor" (130). The Mayor's mask is unable to protect him, and I suggest that Chukker castrates the Mayor, depriving him both of his privacy and subsequently of his power: "It was not generally known to the populace that Mr. Guernsey, the liberal republican leader of the Greatest City on Earth, had the minutest cock ever conceived.

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<sup>276</sup> No other guru examined in this project uses such a device. Yet their control over a disciple's mind never wavers. The "hemispheric bowl" is an unnecessary gadget.

<sup>277</sup> Chukker's bowl is like Jeremy Bentham's "Panopticon" design for prisons that Michel Foucault discusses in *Discipline and Punish*. As Foucault writes: "The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately... Each individual, in his place, is securely confined to a cell from which he is seen from the front by the supervisor; but the side walls prevent him from coming into contact with his companions. He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication... And this invisibility is a guarantee of order" (200).

No one would have known that the Mayor was indeed the Mayor if this particular exchange had not taken place...In fact this exchange was a political investment. The Mayor was inept” (131). This is also the instant where Chukker’s Guruism falters. The Tantric guru who worshipped the body, and taught his disciples to do the same, does not really care for different kinds of bodies.

The dress code, instead of creating unity, is Chukker’s way of focusing his attentions on the well endowed—physically and financially. All the guests invited to the party are well off. The party invitations had created quite a stir and: “Two nursing homes were set up...doctors were imported from all over the country and some even from abroad...They were paid three and four times the normal fee” (124). Yet again the guru’s activities cause lifestyle changes in his disciples and the domestic/international movement of people is inevitable. The desperation to look good is understandable, but the willingness to present one’s self as the guru wanted to see them, is indicative of the extent to which Chukker controls the minds of his disciples.<sup>278</sup> Quite comically, “Those omitted from the [invitation] list shut themselves up in purdah or migrated to another State” (124). Presumably, those omitted are not socially influential people. Chukker’s Guruism is thus not for every class.

The guru’s hold on the upper class seems to be stronger. For example, the Nobel Committee did not want to award him for *The Making of the Guru* because: “The Nobel Prize” is awarded to the “entire works of a man” (197). Yet “like a leech, both the book and the man clung to their minds” (197). Some see Chukker’s autobiography as a “virus,” and he is considered to be “One of those transient fancies that infect the nation, like Cookbooks and Custom-built cars. An affluent society needed its periodic flirtation with the zany” (153). Chukker is sometimes seen as an affliction that is consuming the nation, particularly the youth. Thus both the general public

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<sup>278</sup> There are indeed many people who act according to the guru’s wishes without thinking about their actions.

and the authorities find it very hard to curtail this infection. At the time Brata was writing the novel, gurus (as well as other cult leaders like them) and their ability to control the mind were seen as a serious problem. Conversions were not just frowned upon, but legal action was taken against those who converted.

For example, in 1980: “both houses of the New York State Legislature passed a ‘mental health’ bill which allows the state to appoint ‘conservators’ to take physical custody of adults who have converted to, or otherwise joined, various religions and require them to suffer ‘medical attention for the proposed temporary conservatee as is necessary’” (ix). The bill was later vetoed by New York Governor Carey who believed that the bill would encroach upon the rights of American citizens who had a constitutional right to follow any religion of their choice. In the novel *Chukker*, however, believes that he is the only “vaccine” for an ailing country (98). *Chukker*’s Guruism never really fails, but he is unable to perfect it because Evelyn murders him two years after he becomes the President of America. In spite of all the social access *Chukker* obtains through Evelyn, he is never able to assume any control over her. Evelyn confuses the guru, and he decides that “Evelyn was no ordinary woman, she was a mutant a hybrid” (80).

*Chukker*’s charms do not affect Evelyn because she is a lesbian. Thus, from *Chukker*’s perspective, unlike the other women, Evelyn does not suffer from hysteria. She is not dependent on men for sexual gratification. Rather: “she was fierce, punctual, dominant, handsome and totally without the sly perverseness of the female” (79). He is threatened both by sexuality and her physical strength.<sup>279</sup> I suggest that this is because she challenges the guru’s promise of sexual mobility. The guru’s theories only seem to work with his heterosexual female disciples. Evelyn becomes a “genie,” even a “Frankenstein,” whom he is never able to control (78). Professionals,

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<sup>279</sup> She has a blue belt in karate. Every time *Chukker* flirts with her, Evelyn threatens to break his neck (75).

like Evelyn, who do not care for spirituality work for gurus because of the money involved.<sup>280</sup> However, through the guru, Evelyn also obtains political power. Chukker's death is never investigated, and Evelyn, who is the Vice President at the time of his death, quietly assumes the presidential role.<sup>281</sup> Chukker's experience with Evelyn illustrates that it is necessary for a guru to approach religion on a more homogenous platform.

Chukker's Guruism appears to be proselytizing in nature.<sup>282</sup> However, he adopts the role of the Hindu religious leader to access the elite American society and to carve a niche for himself in the diaspora. The formless inclusivity that characterizes Chukker's philosophy proves to be beneficial. As Brata writes:

the tentacles of Hinduism are so *elastic and infinite* that *there is no belief you can profess that will make you an infidel*. This is where *sadhus* and gurus come in. The exportable variety of Hinduism, represented by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (of Mia Farrow and Beatles fame in the sixties) and a score of others, are resented by most Indians... Educated Indians contend that these fraudulent gurus do a lot of damage to the concept of Hinduism, behaving as it were a free-for-all. (*India* 199)<sup>283</sup>

The elasticity and the "free-for-all" philosophy, however, are not that damaging. Through Chukker's unprecedented success, Brata has exaggerated the "threat" that a guru poses to the American people, although the novel coerces us to think about some serious issues. In *The*

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<sup>280</sup> For Evelyn, Chukker is a fraud. Although Chukker claims to administer to his disciples "The Peace that passeth understanding," Evelyn believes that it "could be called a bit of elementary psychology administered by a very practiced quack" (147). She is the only person who intentionally does not attend his party.

<sup>281</sup> Evelyn had been appointed the Vice President in accordance with the guru's wishes. Chukker knew that she would be able to get the male votes. There is some indication in the text that the President is murdered, but nothing is clearly stated.

<sup>282</sup> In "Blood at the Root" Brata writes that: It may be a "perverted irony that the younger (Judaean-Christian-Islamic) religions allow and even actively encourage conversions, while the older ones (Hinduism, Confucianism, Buddhism) do not aggressively proselytise" (37). But the older ones, especially Hinduism, now have new sects through which such conversions are possible. In the introduction to *New Religions and Mental Health*, Richardson discusses how youth who converted into the new religions (these include religious cults like the "Hare Krishna Religion") in the 1980s were brainwashed by proselytizing elements in the new religions.

<sup>283</sup> My emphasis. Brata also suggests that this "phenomenon"—the Guruism—"is thankfully on the wane" (*India* 200).

*Sensuous Guru*, Guruism is a lucrative profession created by the society for men like Chukker who are comfortable fitting into stereotypes that grant social mobility and is financially profitable.

Such is the power of these stereotypes that Chukker, occasionally, believes in his Guruism and trusts that “there was a clear pool of unadulterated soul, and it would be my life’s goal to go tell the whole world how to find it” (61). Although he never finds this “pool,” he considers it his duty to. Chukker’s search for it echoes Vivekananda’s idea of the Mystic East as responsible for inserting spirituality into the West. Perhaps Chukker begins to believe in the mystical East myth, which is ingrained in the guru’s understanding of himself. In a talk on TED, Shashi Tharoor discusses a new India: “we’ve gone from the image of India as the land of fakirs lying on beds of nails and snake charmers of the Indian rope trick to the image of India as the land of mathematical geniuses, computer wizards, software gurus.” Although much comedy ensues from the sarcasm in *The Sensuous Guru*, there is the underlying truth that India continues to be, in some ways, what it was to colonial Britain—the mystical land of gurus and fakirs, albeit with a few “mathematical geniuses.”

**CHAPTER 5**  
**ETERNAL RELIGION AND THE MOTHER IN ANITA DESAI'S *JOURNEY TO ITHACA***

“Always keep Ithaca fixed in your mind.  
To arrive there is your ultimate goal.  
But do not hurry the voyage at all.  
It is better to let it last for long years....”<sup>284</sup>

Naipaul's Ganesh adopts Guruism as a self defense mechanism. For Dabydeen's Devan, Guruism is a path to social success. Brata's Chukker ascends to power and prominence in a society that wants him to play guru. Although their Guruisms sometimes have a positive impact on their disciples, the authenticity of some of the gurus discussed in the earlier chapters is debatable. Like these gurus, the Mother in Anita Desai's *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) looks for solace in Hinduism. Half Egyptian and half French, the Mother, or Laila as she is known before she attains enlightenment, is a Muslim woman whose quest for spirituality leads her to India. The Mother's Indian *ashram* houses devotees from all over the world who have come to obtain enlightenment. Desai's depiction of her leaves no doubt about the guru's divinity and authenticity.

Not surprisingly, most readings of Desai's novel either criticize the naiveté of the Mother's devotees or focus on their quest for spirituality as a central concern in the novel. For example, discussing *Journey to Ithaca* Pico Iyer writes that the novel

traces two overlapping and parallel stories (not always perfectly joined) about two generations of Western seekers in India—the first the generic European travelers of the mid-‘70s, who went to find enlightenment (or enthrallment) in distant ashrams, the second arising out of that electric moment between the wars when the moneyed

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<sup>284</sup> The quote is from Constantine P. Cavafy's poem titled *Ithaca*. Desai includes this poem in the preface to her novel. The island of Ithaca, Greece, is beautiful, but hard to reach. Sailors considered it the ultimate destination. In Desai's novel, I believe Ithaca symbolizes the ultimate destination where spiritual seekers of all backgrounds find enlightenment.



bohemian women of the West first came into contact with the sinuous wise men of the East. (166)

Desai does not merely reproduce the “two generations of Western seekers in India.” The Mother’s Guruism is different from all the gurus that I have discussed in this project. The Mother, I argue, constructs her ashram, and the various networks that link the ashram to the world, not on the basis of secular religion, but through what Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) refers to as “eternal” religion.<sup>285</sup>

Explaining Sri Aurobindo’s idea of the “religion of nationalism,” Peter Heehs writes that for this freedom fighter/guru: “The only ‘political creed’ that could liberate India was one that came from a ‘higher source’. Those who lived this creed felt that they were ‘instruments of God to save the light, to save the spirit of India from lasting obscurity and abasement’” (Heehs).

Differentiating his definition of religion from the more traditional meaning of the term, Sri Aurobindo:

made it clear that he did not mean by this any sectarian religion, but the ‘eternal religion’ that underlay all limited systems of belief. ‘A narrow religion, a sectarian religion, an exclusive religion can only live for a limited time and a limited purpose,’ he pointed out. The eternal religion would live forever because it was based on the realisation [sic] that God ‘is in all men and all things’. (Heehs)<sup>286</sup>

The Mother’s *ashram* celebrates “eternal religion,” and ethnicity, nationality or caste does not matter here. Unlike the other gurus, she sees God in everything and everybody. Once disciples are within the *ashram*, where the Mother is the primary and only authority, all sectarian associations are forgotten. All her disciples must ascribe to her interpretation of spirituality,

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<sup>285</sup> Peter Heehs writes that Sri Aurobindo: “began to regard himself as an instrument in the hands of the Divine and encouraged others to do the same. ‘Have you got real faith?’ he asked at a political rally in 1908. ‘Or is it merely a political aspiration? Is it merely a larger kind of selfishness?’” In spite of these clarifications by Sri Aurobindo his words have since been misinterpreted, and he has been accused of abetting the vision of Hindutva.

<sup>286</sup> For more information see: <<http://www.lifepositive.com/spirit/god/god.asp>>

which is neither about maintaining religious paraphernalia, nor about following holy texts blindly. As the Mother teaches, enlightenment is a journey within, not without.

The concept of “eternal religion” is especially relevant in the India of 1992, the year in which Desai wrote the novel. Triggered by the demolition of the Babri Masjid, or the Mosque of Babur, the country was torn by communal violence between the Hindus and Muslims.<sup>287</sup> There were rumors that the mosque had been built over the ruins of a temple. Political parties with a Hindu religious agenda like the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad) and the BJP (Bharatiya Janta Party) used the ensuing controversy to arouse Hindu nationalist sentiments. Kar Sevaks, usually holy men or renouncers who are almost fanatical in their support of Hinduism, demolished the mosque despite Indian Supreme Court orders.

Immediately following the demolition, riots ensued all over the country. Thousands are believed to have died in these devastating communal clashes. The demolition of the mosque was seen as a reiteration of Hindu nationalists who imagined an India minus the Muslims. The BJP, which was somewhat directly involved with the demolitions, were elected to govern the country in 1998.<sup>288</sup> They remained in power till 2004. Both the BJP’s rise to power and their election to the national government seem to implicate the majority of the Indian people who voted for the BJP. The riots were a devastating blow to Desai who is very fond of India, and she understandably became disillusioned with the regressive Hindu nationalism.

In an interview in 1992, lamenting the ever-changing post-independence, post-partition and, most importantly, post-Babri Masjid India, Desai says:

I’m thinking of the riots over the building of the temple where the Mosque built by Babar stands, which has set off riots and killings all over the country, which shows what a

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<sup>287</sup> Babur, the first Mughal Emperor of India, constructed the Babri Masjid in 1527.

<sup>288</sup> Though the BJP have often denied any links with the demolition of the mosque, in an interview with Vir Sanghvi BJP party worker Pramod Mahajan owns up to it. See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8SzO-2JO9Y0>

precarious position Muslims have in India. It disturbs me immensely to think that it's a country with a monolithic religion, a monolithic society. It's no longer the composite society I knew. (161)<sup>289</sup>

Everyone is welcome at the Mother's ashram as she rejects the "monolithic religion" by adopting "eternal" religion. Through the Mother, Desai, I argue, attempts to recreate the "composite" India she once knew. In 1987, in the introduction to Mitch Epstein's *In Pursuit of India*, Desai had described this India:

Like America, India is a metaphor—but a metaphor for quest, for search, rather than for achievement and fulfillment. More than anything else, India is the scene of a pilgrimage, every Indian a pilgrim. The overwhelming impression is of a people striving toward a god—but a god with as many names and many forms as there are pilgrims... In India it becomes possible to move freely from one sphere to the other, so freely that one can become confused and hardly know which area one occupies. (5)<sup>290</sup>

India, as Desai defines, is the obvious destination of all those who seek enlightenment through a single god. This "ardor and passion" for a uniform spiritual cause has the power to transform "even the sick, gross or malformed body into something at least temporarily incandescent" (Epstein 6). The result is that: "The dividing line between fantasy and reality, the secular and the religious is so fine and elusive, it often wavers and disappears" (Epstein 6). Following the violent aftermaths of the demolition, Desai shuns this dreamy elusiveness since the dividing line between the secular and the religious became all too clear.

For Desai, the uniform religious quest and the land that always healed the "sick, gross or malformed" is no longer a reality. I suggest that the exotic Indian spirituality, celebrated in 1987, is reexamined in the 1995 novel, *Journey to Ithaca* through the figure of the guru and the ashram the guru creates. Although India is still the destination for the spiritually hungry Westerner,

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<sup>289</sup> From *Interviews with Writers of the Post-Colonial World*. Interview conducted by Feroza Jussawalla in 1992.

<sup>290</sup> Desai does acknowledge that the search is not always religious: "Not that every man imagines his quest to be spiritual and its end a religious edifice," however, she maintains that "in all cases—feeling and emotion are so heightened as to approach the spiritual" (5).

Desai changes the standards of this pilgrimage. I argue that far from romanticizing India, Desai's novel shatters ignorance and reminds readers that it is essential to construct identity through a non-secular perspective. The message that affiliation to the self is higher than that to a nation, race or religion is crucial in a country charged with religious violence.

To illustrate her composite India, Desai's choice of a female guru is crucial. The Mother is a striking contrast to Hindu female renouncers, or *Sadhvis*, who participated in the Babri Masjid demolition movement by inciting the general population. As Kalyani Devaki Menon writes, "While both male and female renouncers joined the movement, it is important to note that female renouncers, often less visible in traditions of renunciation, became quite prominent" (145). Not only were the *Sadhvis* visible to the public eye, but they were also actively participating in politics. *Sadhvis* often incited the general population: "The power of women (albeit renouncers) calling on men to avenge the honor of Hindu womanhood is central to successful mobilization of men to engage in acts of violence against Muslims" (Menon 145). Prior to the Babri Masjid demolition movement *Sadhvis* did not have any influence in India since religious texts like the *Mundala Upanishad* strictly forbids holy men and women from directly participating in political matters.<sup>291</sup>

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel *Anandamath* (1882), however, forever changed the role that male and female renouncers would play in Indian politics. Based on the *Sannyasi* Rebellion in the late eighteenth century, the novel glorifies *Sannyasis* (or monks) who joined the freedom struggle for independence against the British. Swami Vivekananda borrowed the idea of the political monk and established the Ramakrishna Order, thus tying religion with service. He "argued that renouncers should participate in the religious and cultural revival of the nation"

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<sup>291</sup> According to the *Mundala Upanishad* "A renouncer is required to...enter a state of complete detachment from relationships, from events, and from the world in general to focus on understanding the nature of ultimate reality" (Menon 147).

(Menon 147).<sup>292</sup> Such views were corroborated with quotations from the *Bhagavad Gita*, where action is encouraged and detachment is synonymous with selfishness. Hindu nationalists used these ideas to inform their politics and thus gave agency to Hindu female renunciators or *Sadhvis*.<sup>293</sup>

I suggest that in the *Journey to Ithaca* Desai stifles the negative image of female renunciators by closely modeling the Mother on Sri Ma—an equally public, yet a more positive, nurturing female renouncer who believed in embracing all peoples.<sup>294</sup> Sri Ma or Blanche Rachel Mirra Alfassa (1878-1973), also known as the Mother of Pondicherry, was one of the most celebrated female gurus in India and the first Westerner to become an Indian guru.<sup>295</sup> Through Sri Ma many prominent Westerners (for example, President Woodrow Wilson’s daughter, Margaret) have become interested in the concept of “eternal religion,” and many still live in her *ashram*, Auroville, in Pondicherry.<sup>296</sup> Auroville, as Minor quotes Sri Ma, “is for those who want to live a life essentially divine but who renounce all religions whether they be ancient, modern,

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<sup>292</sup> As I show later, the Mother reads Vivekananda and she may have come across these ideas in his works.

<sup>293</sup> Menon points out that even the *Sadhvi Shakti Parishad* was “established” by the VHP who wanted “to create a platform through which Hindu female renunciators could play a vital role in the politics” (145).

<sup>294</sup> Desai acknowledges at the end of the novel that accounts of Sri Ma’s life gave her “much of the material” for the novel (311). This is reiterated in Desai’s interview with Magda Costa in Barcelona, on 30 Jan 2001. Costa asks if “the character in *Journey to Ithaca*, Mother, is based on a real person?” Desai confirms: “Yes. She was a French woman who set up this ashram in Pondicherry with a very famous Indian sage, Aurobindo. She outlived him by many years and died in her nineties. She was very much revered in India. What intrigued me was that, being a foreigner, she became this Indian mystic.” See: Rawlinson, Andrew *The Book of Enlightened Masters: Western Teachers in Eastern Traditions*. Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1997.

<sup>295</sup> Throughout this chapter I address the Mother of Pondicherry as Sri Ma, and the Mother in Desai’s novel as the Mother.

<sup>296</sup> Sri Ma was revered by Sri Aurobindo as the “Universal Mother” and as George Van Vrekhem explains: “The Mother is the Consciousness-Power of the Divine, which means that She is His power of manifestation. . . . She is the Divine essentially, intrinsically. Secondly, the Mother-Power in the Divine would also be there in Him if He were not manifesting any part of Himself. He is She, She is He; they are One” (154).

new or future” (53).<sup>297</sup> Desai’s guru shares this philosophy and advocates eternal religion. The Mother’s *ashram* thus becomes the “composite” India that Desai had once admired. Through this ashram (and the networks surrounding it), the Mother mobilizes thousands of disciples all over the world to admire diversity and to view nirvana as a state of mind.

Like the *sadhvis*, the Mother “weave[s] the sacred into the political realm” (Menon 164). However, in the Mother’s teachings the meaning of sacred is different: religion and the gods are not sacred. Individuals, and their contribution to society, are sacred. Sri Ma and the Mother’s spiritualities seem to go back to the *Upanishads* where the “path to liberation is through a transforming wisdom” (Menon 148). The Mother encourages her devotees to live a life that coerces them to go beyond the petty confines of established religious institutions. The Mother’s aversion to conform to social and religious norms begins in her childhood. Like the other gurus examined in this project, the Mother suffers from an identity crisis. The half-Egyptian, half-French woman is accepted neither by her Egyptian nor by her French sides. Her dual heritage makes it hard to be French in Egypt, and Egyptian in France. This fuels her search for a shelter—an identity that would allow her to be free of any boundaries. As I shall show, the Mother’s Guruism and her ashram prove to be a refuge not only for her devotees, but also for her.

### **The Mother as Laila**

In Egypt, the Mother, or Laila as she is known before she attains enlightenment, is caught between two opposing worldviews—the French colonial/modern and the Egyptian traditional/religious. The freedom she desires is not only from her parents and her books, but also

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<sup>297</sup> Sri Ma forbade her disciples to believe in any religion, warning them “You must not confuse a religious teaching with a spiritual one. Religious teaching belongs to the past and halts progress. Spiritual teaching is the teaching of the future... [it] is above religions and strives towards a global Truth. It teaches use to enter into direct relation with the Divine” (qtd. Minor 44). See Minor. *The Mother, Collected Works*, XIII, p. 212.

from the confines that the Egyptian society places on her.<sup>298</sup> Although the native Egyptians dislike the French influence in their society, they are forced to adopt it in order to be successful in their own country. For example, French is Laila's mother tongue and it comes easily to her, but her Arabic friends struggle with this compulsory language at the American College for girls in Cairo. Yet knowledge of the language is essential. As Laila's friend, Fatimah, tells her, by learning French the girls would secure a "good husband...a rich man, a smart man" (169). Conversely, it is not easy to be French in Egypt either. Ashamed of her mother's French origins, Laila never mentions it to her Arabic friends at the College, but she still looked "foreign" to them (169). The Egypt that Laila grew up in is thus divided, and the French and the Egyptians are forced to get along.

Yet, as Laila learns, the two sides can never integrate. Her attempts to understand her Arabic friends, and to embrace Islam, are doused by her mother who sends Laila to live with aunt Francoise in Paris, France.<sup>299</sup> Laila, who never wishes to learn the French ways, is a horror

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<sup>298</sup> Her peaceful Egyptian family in Alexandria is almost always threatened by her "wildly" ways. Laila is always shown fleeing from her parents because she felt like a "prisoner" in her own house (165). For them Laila "could have been born a gypsy child, a foundling they had adopted" (166). She did not care much for education, and her treatment of textbooks shocked her both her parents who were professors. Laila "had in her some of the rage, and the pride of a goddess. 'I want – I want – to dance,' she burst out, pushing at the air as if to clear a space for herself. 'Not sit here, reading, reading, reading -' she spat out – 'but out, dancing! Then I would be free'" (165). Sri Ma had a similar childhood. Young Mirra "lived an intense parallel life nobody knew about...to her positivist mother, all unusual inner experiences were 'brain disorders,' to be treated without further ado by a family physician" (Vrekhem 9). And Mirra "had many strange experiences and sometimes went into trance in the middle of a sentence or a gesture" (Vrekhem 10). Her parents were forced to deal with many embarrassing situations whenever Mirra went into a trance publicly.

<sup>299</sup> Laila is more attracted to the less Westernized, "good Muslim" girls (169). Their Koran classes are "intensely moving" for her, and she joins them in their struggle against British rule (170). Laila finds her sentiments echoed in their quest for freedom. Thus while the Koran classes are "intensely moving," French requires her to conform (170). Desai summarizes Laila's attraction for Islam and for the freedom struggle thus: "she was drawn first in one direction, then another, wherever she saw passion taken to its extreme, whether celebratory or ascetic" (174). It

to her French aunt and cousins. Laila's awareness of her Egyptian identity is more pronounced in France where she clearly stands out as a foreigner. In Alexandria and Cairo she had freely roamed the streets and visited shops, but in France "She knew better than to go without any money to spend – special hostility was reserved for a woman who was not only dark and foreign but also penniless" (194). Aunt Francoise fails to understand Laila's crisis—she is a foreigner in both Egypt and France.

For her aunt, Laila is nothing more than a "mad, wild beast" (185). Laila's ways so frustrate Francoise that the latter "rolling her eyes heavenwards, cried, 'What has that sister of mine been doing? Can she have forgotten entirely the ways of the civilized world? She has brought up a savage!'" (182).<sup>300</sup> Laila begins to shun Christianity because the extremely orthodox Francoise practices her religion with great vigor and often disapproves of her "Moslem" niece. Their many attempts to take Laila to church are thwarted by the latter's protests. Forced away from her "savage" world of Islam and disgusted by her aunt's "civilized" Christian Paris, Laila chooses to embrace the non-traditional *Bhakti* cult of Hinduism.<sup>301</sup>

In Paris she finds an "Orientalist bookshop, and more specifically an Indological one" at the rue Descartes that had "untidy heaps of books, all with titles referring to l'Orient or l'Inde" (196). There were "books of travel, art, philosophy and religion," and Laila gazed at "them for a long time, trying to read some of the unfamiliar words – *Rig Veda*, *Samhita*, *Ratnavali*, *La Kama Sutra*, *Brhadanyaka Upanishad*, *La Bhagavad Gita*, *The Sacred Books of the East*" (195). Here, for the first time, Laila learns about the Hindu god Krishna and becomes obsessed by him: "The

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is this passion that is always stifled—by her parents, by her books, and then finally by her mother's sister in Paris where her family sends her to be groomed in Western ways.

<sup>300</sup> The "civilized world" that her aunt is referring to is obviously France. Egypt is the land of the "savage." Nevertheless, Laila finds the so-called "civilized world" to be "devoid of any cheer or hospitality" (186).

<sup>301</sup> Her initial encounter with the religion is coincidental. I believe she holds onto the religion owing to the elasticity of Hindu philosophy (as Brata describes in the last chapter).



regally calm expression on the face of the exotic statue conveyed a sense of welcome and greeting that she could not define and did not stop to” (195).<sup>302</sup> She does not associate this “welcome and greeting” with any other religious experience in her life.

The blue god conveys freedom and fulfills her longing for the unorthodox. There is a sense of oneness with the blue god who “unnerved” her, but “by no means frightened her” (195).

Different religious texts focus on different aspects of Krishna’s personality:

Whereas the *bhakti* of *Mahabharata* and *Bhagavad Gita* is staid and pietistic, its devotion channeled through a life of discipline and strict adherence to ethical and social norms, in the medieval *bhakti* cults and down to the present day, *bhakti* is no longer a pale and austere affair but rather emphasizes intoxication and uninhibited response to the dark god, a release from the constraints and precepts of orthodox Hinduism. (*Inner World* 141)

Laila reads a range of books and chooses the medieval and present day *bhakti* cults. These claim that Krishna *bhakti* provides “a vision of the divine that is free and spontaneous, boisterous and anarchical” (*Inner World* 141). In these latter day cults, multiple forms of worship are accepted, and a personal relationship with the god is encouraged. Instead of an order to conform, Krishna *bhakti* gives “permission for joy” (*Inner World* 142). Unlike most established religions, which have a strict paternal figure as the godhead, the playful Krishna “invites the devotee to fuse with him” (*Inner World* 161). This allows some agency to the individual and removes the need for a priest or a pundit. The invitation to fuse also creates the illusion of enlightenment since the devotee now fuses with that which he was pursuing.<sup>303</sup>

Lost in the moment of temporary release, provided by the image of the blue god, Laila sees a *Krishna Lila* poster for a dance drama advertised on the door of the “Orientalist

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<sup>302</sup> Iyer traces the appearance of the figure of Krishna in novels and writes that: “Nearly always, these lithe, androgynous objects of female fascination are called Krishna” (169). Laila’s adoration of Krishna is stemming from her desire to worship a higher power in her own way.

<sup>303</sup> Movements like the Iskcon (International Society for Krishna Consciousness), which encourage this personal relationship with the Supreme Being, have thus become quite popular over the years.

bookshop.”<sup>304</sup> The poster has a singular effect on her: “The words caught at Laila with a snare so sharp that she almost cried out... Later she was to say that at that moment she was confronted by her true self, that she at that moment discovered it. Laila, Lila. Laila, Lila. Krishna Krishna. Krishna Lila” (199). Coincidentally, the *Krishna Lila* is based on the stories of the blue god that Laila admires. Although her naïve interpretation of her name and its confusion with the type of dance that is going to be showcased suggest her ignorance, the poster gives her passions a face and a place—India. The blue god, the poster and the books on the mystic East are attractive because they promise freedom. Unlike the other gurus, Laila adopts a foreign god to get away from the familiarity that requires her to conform.

Through the poster, India becomes a crucial part of her identity in a way that Cairo and Paris do not. Laila felt that “she had once been one of them [the gods and India], possessed what they had, lost it but now saw she must grasp it” (203). The sense of oneness and the need to grasp this unknown land may be easily explained as Laila’s blind obsession, but her continued attempts to learn about India are noteworthy. She read: “Edwin Arnold’s *Light of Asia*, Pierre Loti’s *L’Inde*, Kalidasa’s *Sakuntala*, went through Great Religions of the World, Max Muller’s *Sacred Books of the East*, Vivekananda’s *Raja Yoga*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, Tagore’s *The Gardener* and *Gitanjali* – pouncing on every reference to Krishna, to Radha” (212). Her romantic vision of India is thus followed up with a more informed opinion of Hindu philosophy. Unlike the other gurus, in this initial stage of fascination with Hindu philosophy she has no ulterior motive or any intentions of transferring her newfound spiritual knowledge into a political agenda.

In an attempt to physically unite with the land of her dreams, Laila joins a dance troupe that travels from Europe, to America and then India, headed by a man named Krishna. The

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<sup>304</sup> “Krishna” actually refers to the god. The “Lila” is a type of dance.

desperate Laila starts to think of her dance instructor as the blue god with whom he shares his name. To her, the instructor's face appears to be:

celestially calm, powerfully noble, the eyes half closed and dreamily smiling. It was the face she had first seen in the miniature painting in the bookshop – the same playfully glinting eyes, the same teasing half-smile, the same large calm brow and skin so dark it made her think of cinnamon and peppercorns. Or perhaps it was the scent of the tea that led her to think of them. (203-4)

Frantic for the blue god who so enticed her at the bookshop, Laila transfers the celestial “calm” of the god to the dancer. Laila grows out of her naïve appreciation when she discovers that the instructor Krishna is only interested in her dance performances and that nirvana is not in sight. Laila is forced to confront the fake celestial image she had created.<sup>305</sup> The passion that Laila desires and the reform that she perpetuates begin at a personal level when she leaves the troupe in India.

Laila designs a new spirituality when she finds enlightenment through her Master, Swami Prem Krishna.<sup>306</sup> The Master, who Desai probably sketches with Sri Aurobindo in mind, is the destination of both the Mother and her disciples.<sup>307</sup> The Mother ultimately achieves

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<sup>305</sup> As she writes in her diary: “*You [Krishna] have shown me devotion to worldly success, to financial gain, to fame—not to the true light for which I came....His [Krishna’s] dancer’s paint is a mask behind which is an evil joker who mocks me. I know now that if I were to rip away the mask of the Blue God, I would see Krishna the dancer – no other*” (286). Krishna’s representation of India is partly to blame for Laila’s naïve attachment to India, and she realizes this: “*I did not know it was your career we came to make in India. I thought we came here to find the Eternal Truth. You told me it existed only in India*” (293). The European and American tours are not what Laila hopes for. Laila begins to shun her European life and longs for an Indian future. Her choice distinguishes her because: “*Paris in the 1870s, and for some decades to come, was the vibrant cultural and political capital of the world. All countries looked up to its celebrities and its trend-setting creations*” (Vrekhem 3).

<sup>306</sup> If there is a God in the novel it is he, and if there is a religion in the novel it is the philosophy that he has preached. In keeping the narrative of the master out of the novel Desai seems to have played up the idea of reformation that Laila so endorses. The Mother’s power and authority need not be sanctioned by the presence of the Master.

<sup>307</sup> David Smith writes that: “*Although veneration continues for medieval women saints such as Meera Bai (late fifteenth century) who took nothing from their spouses, the first women*

enlightenment and creates her own space in India in the form of an ashram to shelter other spiritual seekers like her.<sup>308</sup> The creation of this ashram is also necessary on a personal level. The Master's devotees at his first ashram in Hardwar shun Laila because "she is a Muslim and a foreigner," and she was thus "polluting" their ashram (134). This rejection by the people of the blue god disturbs her, and I suggest that the unpleasant experience also prevents her from designating Hinduism as the primary religion in her own ashram.

While she borrows heavily from Hindu philosophy, the Mother's ashram is not just for the Hindus: "the Indian devotees were mostly elderly, retired men or widows whose children and grandchildren occasionally came to visit them...many of the foreign devotees had young families and were settling down into a life at once devotional and domestic" (122). The Mother's love and teachings make it possible for people from different backgrounds to exist harmoniously. Her ashram, to borrow a term from Desai, is an "unfettered vacuum."<sup>309</sup> Discussing the phrase, Chandra Chatterjee writes:

The terms 'unfettered' and 'vacuum' inscribe a paradox against the background of history and society involved with anti-colonial struggles and their aftermath. The idea of a lack of a binding factor is combined with a concept of space which has been emptied or exhausted. It is a space where walls between east and west, home and not-home and tradition and modernity do not exist. It suits Desai's novels of the nineties where singularities of nationality or religion are no longer significant demarcating positions. (124)

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gurus/saints in modern times tended to be wives of gurus who took over their husband's role after death or retirement, such as Saradamani (1853-1920) widow of Ramakrishna, and Mira Alfassa, 'the Mother,' (1878-1973) wife of Aurobindo" (29). Smith continues that: "A more modern phenomenon is women who are believed to be embody the highest godhead. Instances are Anandamayi Ma (1896-1982), highly regarded by many important Indians, Ammachi, Amritanandamayi Ma (1954-), who touches and blesses individually vast crowds of devotees; Meera Devi (1960-) who does the same in a much smaller scale on Germany" (29).

<sup>308</sup> In the introduction to Epstein's photographs, Desai writes: "Trapped in a land of such hurly-burly and commotion, each makes an island for himself, creates a space in which to be himself so that he may not be crushed and obliterated by all that is around him" (7).

<sup>309</sup> Desai coins the phrase in her 1999 novel *Fasting, Feasting*.

The ashram is such an “unfettered vacuum”—where there are endless possibilities of being and life is without a “binding factor.” This “vacuum” (the physical space of the ashram and the mind/heart of the guru’s disciples) has been emptied of any affiliations. The Mother fills this vacuum with spiritual *sadhna* and love for a higher power. The space of the vacuum is converted into a place and the *ashram* comes to signify, as I argue, not only India but also the ideal world that the Mother is looking to create.<sup>310</sup>

### **Eternal Religion and the Network Keepers**

Out of all the gurus, the Mother is the only one who creates and organizes the various functions in her state-like *ashram* that constitutes of “a settlement of low houses” (94). She is in complete control of the networks through which she makes her work and her *ashram* known. The network tools (factories, farms, pharmacies, the printing press, etc.) are located within the *ashram*, but more importantly her devotees, i.e. the network keepers, are also involved in the creation and maintenance of the various channels through which the Mother disseminates her wisdom. Her work is not particularly difficult since the guru and the disciples are driven by their singular desire to attain enlightenment. Unlike the disciples that the other gurus have, the Mother’s disciples are steeped in Vedic philosophy and are self-motivated. Even her German disciple, Matteo, who has a romantic notion of what it means to be a guru, is well versed in Sanskrit. The Mother is not required to instruct them on yoga, as they meditate and practice yoga on a daily basis. This is partially what contributes to her success as a guru.

The Mother is the only guru who comes close to explaining her version of the term enlightenment. The other gurus often talk of enlightenment, but they never explicitly explain the

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<sup>310</sup> From: *The Religious, the Spiritual and the Secular: Auroville and Secular India*. “On February 28, 1968, Auroville was officially founded five miles northeast of Pondicherry... Young people from 124 nations placed handfuls of soil from their native lands into a marble urn situated at what would be the center of the township” (55).

processes through which this most elusive state of existence may be achieved.<sup>311</sup> The Mother's concept of enlightenment does not involve chants, mantras, sex or politics. She defines enlightenment as spiritual *sadhna*, the effort behind any achievement (103). As she tells her devotees "one must work, one must make efforts to achieve *anything*" (102). Her devotees are thus taught to worship work, and they each have a duty assigned to them. The *ashram* exists because of the work that they do.

Unlike the indenture gurus and Chukker, the Mother is concerned with providing a pleasing environment for her devotees. Knowledge of scriptures is essential, but cleanliness and beauty are also part of the journey to enlightenment. Desai's description of the *ashram* is beautiful and the *ashram* appears to be some sort of a paradise. When Matteo comes to the *ashram* for the first time he is surprised by its beauty: "everywhere there were signs of habitation and cultivation...groves of oleander and hibiscus bushes in flower and citrus and guava orchards bearing fragrant fruit...fountains of paper flower...Birds called to each other" (94). The well maintained *ashram* grounds are not only the work of a good gardener, but they also reflect the Mother's philosophies. The garden is littered with signs that say, for example, "Well Beginning is Half Done, Character is Spirituality and Respect the Elders" (94). These messages have nothing to do with any particular religion, but they are important because they serve as reminders to devotees of the basic principles of good human behavior. The gardener, who is one of her disciples, lives in the *ashram* and dutifully looks after the garden. As the Mother assures them, this is the gardener's path to enlightenment. Like the gardener, every devotee in the *ashram* is involved in some *ashram*-related work. The completion of these duties is necessary, since it is part of their individual journeys.

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<sup>311</sup> The Mother's teaching techniques are different from those of, for example, Chukker. The sensuous President guru never explains what the "Peace that Passeth Understanding" comprises even though he always mentions it in repeatedly in his speeches.

The Mother does not rely on the mercy of public relations officers or even the city publishers who do not understand her mission. The structure of the networks in the ashram is not determined by financial concerns. The *ashram* has its own printing press, for example, which mainly publishes the Master's books and prints photos of the Mother. The printed matters are then distributed globally. This is the primary means of communication between the Mother and the world, and it is obviously successful since the Mother is known internationally. As she tells some of her devotees: "People come to us from the town, from cities and countries all over the world" (99). Matteo too finds this *ashram* because of one such photo he sees in a book in the railway station.

The *ashram* has its own doctors, lawyers and even its own farm. The extremely prosperous farm connects the ashram to the surrounding city through the fruits, vegetables, butter, curds, ghee and milk it produces and sells to the non-devotees. There is also a playground, a nursery school and a crèche for those with families. In spite of the solid infrastructure within the *ashram*, the Mother is occasionally helped by some of her wealthy devotees. For example, a devotee has donated the main bungalow, or the Abode of Bliss, to her.<sup>312</sup> However, the Mother never asks for monetary donations. Thus any subsequent construction on the property has been the result of the *ashram*'s independent efforts.

A secretary handles devotees and their housing within the *ashram*. New devotees must fill out forms and then they are sent to live in the house called "Welcome; it was where guests stayed for short periods" (95). The stay is of course free of charge, and the only method of payment is through work. For Matteo, who comes to the *ashram* expecting to join "a place for

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<sup>312</sup> The *ashram* grounds were used as "a hunting lodge" and a "retreat" before the Mother acquired it (135).

serious study and meditation,” the Mother’s governing powers are a source of dismay (95). She employs Matteo as her letter writer, and each day at his new job “dealt him a severe blow” since:

The Mother’s letters were not to swamis and yogis elsewhere on the finer points of theology or philosophy; they were not even letters to her devotees who appealed for help or clarification. They were her official correspondence with various departments of the town council about matters such as the clearing of garbage from the ashram grounds (which the council claimed lay under their jurisdiction) the sale of a bumper crop of guavas...the building of more cattle sheds and the distribution of surplus milk in town. Then there were endless memos to the devotees who ran different enterprises—all remarkably detailed, precise and revealing a knowledge of housekeeping, animal husbandry, fruit and vegetable farming, health and hygiene and other specialised [sic] professions. (118)

The Mother’s Guruism breaks same taboos about gurus and their spirituality. Guruism, as the Mother practices, is not simply concerned with nirvana or with transcending this world for a higher plane. She teaches her devotees to make the best of life in this world by devoting all their energies to fulfilling their duties. Thus knowledge of housekeeping, animal husbandry, farming and health are equally important. Unlike the other gurus, the Mother is not interested in toppling the present government, but she challenges this government only when the safety of her *ashram* is in question. Thus she does not hesitate to contact the town council. Her work is her spirituality, and she takes her role of governance extremely seriously.

As a guru she considers it her responsibility to protect her devotees and her ashram. To that end, even though the devotees are individually responsible for the various enterprises, the Mother maintains a certain amount of power over these: “Her mornings were clearly very busy: a fleet of secretaries attended her, kneeling to show her memos, standing with bowed heads to listen to advice, going in and out with ledgers and files, or seated to take dictation” (115).

Although Brata’s guru employs a fancy public relations person to announce his Guruism, Evelyn never respects him. Basdeo, who Naipaul’s guru hires to sell his books, warns the guru that his



books will not sell because they are worthless. Mr. Bhairam Bhuraji, the only real secretary Dabydeen's guru ever has, often doubts Devan's plans. The Mother's network keepers, on the other hand, are in constant awe of her because her concern for them is reflected in all her actions.

The disciples of the gurus in the other novels work their life around the guru. The Mother, however, sits for hours explaining the nuances of life to her devotees. The discussion sessions with her devotees are interactive, and they are encouraged to sit in a circle: "The circle of course had no leader and there was no one at its centre" (96). Unlike the other gurus, the Mother does not put herself on a pedestal, but this never compromises her charm. The Divine Force that she often talks about is powerful and, as she tells her devotees, "we all feel its power...giving us shelter, giving us shade" (99). The word "all" is important. The devotees do not need her to feel the power of the Divine Force. They are only required to "Be open to the Divine, let it enter you" (99). Although she seems to be negating the role of the guru, the Mother is quick to point out that not all devotees are alike. Some devotees cannot feel the Divine Force, as they should. For those men and women she has a separate instruction: "take from me, take my strength, take my love for you, hold my hand, let me help you" (100). The guru here not only acts as a guide, but also as a source of strength.

Ganesh, Devan and Chukker's disciples are only able to receive the guru's "wisdom" for a few hours at most. The Mother's devotees, owing to their location within the *ashram*, are in close quarters with her all day long. The *ashram* is thus crucial to her Guruism since it keeps the devotee within her reach. However, the Mother is the only guru who allows individuals to determine their need for a guru. Although all her devotees stay in the *ashram*, not everyone is required to meet her. She assists only those who struggle in their quest for an enlightened spirituality. As she points out, the journey to enlightenment is not easy.

Devotees do not have to organize private meetings with her, because she reaches out to them in a motherly way. Every evening “bells rang, conches blew and lights came on; everyone came out of their lairs and hurried towards a central courtyard” (96). This is the signal for the communal mealtime. All the meals are cooked in one kitchen and then enjoyed together. The devotees view each other as extended families, and this communal lifestyle is absent in the other novels. The *ashram*, through such practices, becomes more like a home. This is essential since it ensures that devotees stay for longer amounts of time. The Mother’s Guruism aims to change their lifestyles and is not simply about a few suggestions for it. Thus the longer the devotees stay the better it is for them.

Through the Mother, some of her disciples transcend their personal myopic interpretation of life and truth. She teaches her devotees to appreciate and be aware of the simple things in life: “There is the ordinary world that most people experience in the ordinary way – that is, they touch, they taste, they see, but without being *aware* because it costs the greatest effort” (103). The *ashram* is different from the ordinary world, and the Mother makes it possible for her devotees to be spiritually aware by handing them formulas or rules that should be followed. This goes against the Mother’s principles that value freedom and mobility. In spite of their best intentions, perhaps gurus can never escape from the authoritarian aspect of their powers since their devotees are disciplined through constricting formulas/rules.

The Mother does not believe in institutionalized religion. In one of her discussions with her devotees, she makes that clear: “We have no religion. Religion? Like the black crows up in the tree, caw-caw-caw, scolding, scolding! But...we have silenced them! They know we do not listen to the black scolding voices of religion here. Religion makes one ashamed, makes one guilty, makes one fearful” (98). The *ashram* is full of happy people, and the atmosphere is

always “sunlit, so calm, so lit with smiles” (95). The happiness is the proof that many joyfully accept the guru’s philosophies of work and worship. She then refers to the Master and reminds her devotees to “Open your hearts to love and light and the joy of loving...so we turn our backs to religion...instead we look at the sky, and the light” (98). There are constant allusions to the Master in most of her speeches.

Photos of the Master are to be found all over the *ashram* even though the Mother does not approve of idol worship. One of the photos suggests the Master’s divinity: “Around his massive head, a halo was tinted in the colors of a rainbow” (115). These photos have garlands on them and incense is lit every evening as a token of respect. Thus the Master is worshipped. The *ashram* is, arguably, an institution and here too there are rules that people have to obey, “even the small children of the ashram grew up on such tenets of the Mother” (122). However, in spite of these discrepancies in their spiritual philosophies, the *ashram* can claim that the Mother’s devotees are not made to feel “fearful” and “guilty”—which she claims are the woes of conventional/secular religion.

Although she shuns religion completely, some of the philosophies she discusses with her devotees seem similar to the basic principles of Hinduism. For example, she says: “We know the Divine Force is not in some idol, not in the cross, not even in the book. We know the Divine Force is everywhere” (99). Some versions of the *Bhagavad Gita* contain illustrations that depict the location of the Divine Force in human beings, animals, and plants, and even in inanimate objects. There are also similarities in the Mother and Lord Krishna’s philosophies about the concept of *karma*. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, underlining the importance of work the blue god says: “one who engages in Karma-yoga with the organs of action, controlling the organs with the mind

and becoming unattached—that one excels” (Gambhirananda 141).<sup>313</sup> The Mother’s constant emphasis on work stems from the idea that actions purify the mind.

However, here too the Mother consciously differentiates her philosophy from traditional ideas. Mind purification, as the Mother believes, is not just about serious study, meditation and yoga. The *ashram* thus provides entertainment. Badminton, music and singing are a significant part of the devotees’ activities. Mealtimes are followed by music “on drums, harmoniums and cymbals and guitars, and devotional songs” (96). The Mother often joins her devotees in badminton, and she is a formidable player. This unconventional approach to spiritual happiness and the genuine attempt to connect with her devotees distinguishes the Mother from other gurus examined in this project. For example, Ganesh’s *Bhagwats* too comprise of food and *bhajans*, but this is more of a political move. Once he is elected as MLC, he stops hosting *Bhagwats*. When Ganesh, Devan and Chukker think of obtaining power through Guruism, they usually advertise their ethnicity through their appearances (clothing/taxis full of books) and other actions. The prayer meeting, the food and the music at the *ashram*, however, are not attractive for the same reason. Yet perhaps this is because the *ashram* is in India, and there is no need to flaunt Indianness here.

By ascribing more meaning to their guru’s actions, disciples find the faith to believe in their chosen leader. For all their charisma, talents and Vedic knowledge, Ganesh, Devan and Chukker never appear to be supernatural beings. Ganesh’s miracles and Chukker’s inexplicable touch, particularly, are often figments of their devotee’s imaginations. The Mother’s divinity,

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<sup>313</sup> There are other similarities with the Mother and Krishna’s philosophies. For example, the Mother is different from the sadhus in the novel because she believes in action. As Krishna tells Arjuna in the Gita: “A person does not attain freedom from action by abstaining from action; nor does he attain fulfillment merely through renunciation” (Gambhirananda 137). The Mother too does not give up her existence in the society. She works as a part of it, contributing to it through her actions. These actions are her way to enlightenment.

however, is undeniable. Whenever she spoke the “crows had settled into the branches of the ficus tree, ruffling their feathers, but made no sound...an invisible cricket that had earlier played a strident tune now merely whispered in the background, and...the light in the sky...now flared up behind the tree and over the rooftop in an extravagant display” (98). This selfless display by nature is the highest homage to the Mother’s Guruism. Such honors do not escape her devotees, and to them she is god: “everyone prostrated themselves before her, full length on the patio, touching their foreheads...in total obeisance” (105). The Mother never struggles for this respect, and the “total obeisance” is the extent of the faith that her devotees have in her.

Nevertheless, Desai never fails to humanize this guru. The Mother “dressed in a crimson robe under which she seemed shrunken and somewhat hunched, with her large head sunk between her shoulders, her hair done up in a turban and her eyes heavy lidded, hooded” (97). The Mother pays no attention to her appearance, unlike the other gurus. When she bends her head “the frail back of her neck with its transparent skin and the knobs of her small bones” show (130). Gurus are considered to be the authority over the disciple and are usually responsible for a disciple’s life path. The Mother’s frailty and her age, however, make her disciples feel like her “protector,” almost “a parent, and she the child” (130). Yet this does not affect her authority and authenticity as a guru: “when she spoke, or fell silent, everyone waited in intense anticipation of her next word, her next gesture, and took it in with grave avidity” (97). There is no sarcasm in Desai’s tone whenever she describes the Mother, and this is different from the irony that Naipaul, Dabydeen and Brata employ to describe their gurus. Desai believes in the Mother and she intended for her readers to have the same reaction. This treatment of the Mother seems to suggest that Desai saw some hope for an India ravaged by religious hate. But she makes it clear that this remedy must come from religious leaders or gurus like the Mother, and not by vicious

*Sadhvis*. For Desai, it became imperative to guide India and its people to a more broad conception of identity.

As we have seen, the Mother is not just concerned with the condition of her disciples' spiritual aspirations, but she is also interested in their interactions with society. Every little action matters and is a direct concern of the guru. I therefore disagree with Radha Chakraborty's interpretation of the *ashram* as a "public forum...a place for collective pursuit of the spiritual" and not as a "private sphere" (86). The private and public cannot be separated in the *ashram* because they are not meant to. The ashram is both the site of the individual's search for universal truth and the individual's contribution to the society of the ashram. The private search for enlightenment is thus not completely private. Since the individual is within the society, their religious beliefs affect the society and can have serious consequences on the society. In post Babri Masjid India this is painfully evident. Hence the Mother's Guruism is crucial to India and the ashram is the example that the entire country should emulate.

Beyond India, the Mother's ashram has significance too. The guru unites the West and the East and proves that people from all regions are engaged in a universal search for shelter and eternal religion. The West is no longer the only spiritual seeker. Like her Indian devotees, her Western devotees suffer from today's fast paced life.<sup>314</sup> Outlining the social-psychological processes that are a "consequence of modernization" (Kakar 143), psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar writes:

The Modernization project is riddled with its own inequities, repressions, and unfraternal conflicts. There is thus bound to be a palpable grief for the values of a lost—and retrospectively idealized—world, when in the brave new one progress often turns out to

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<sup>314</sup> As the world marches deeper into modernization it also participates in another movement simultaneously. This movement is a regression of sorts, and it is born of the necessity of man to feel a need for familiarity in a globalized, ever changing world. Religious communities like the ashram are thus increasingly inviting spaces. Iskcon (International Society for Krishna Consciousness), for example, has a growing number of followers both in India and abroad.

be glaring inequality, rationality becomes selfishness and the pursuit of self-interest, and individualism comes to mean unbridled greed. (146)

The Mother restores equality and rationality, and there is no place for selfishness in her ashram. The ashram is the idealized world and can therefore act as a refuge for those who do not want to identify with troublesome sectarian religions. Instead of a Hindu or European worldview, the Mother encourages spiritual homogenization. Although the Mother has disciples from all over the world, it is her ability to weave all peoples into this one vision that makes her Guruism unique.<sup>315</sup>

### **Matteo's Insane Enlightenment**

Desai cherishes the Mother's positive, un-*Sadhvi* like image. The Mother is obviously charismatic and powerful. However, as the novel's end seems to suggest, regardless of a guru's motives the extent of their allure and control can be handicapping for the disciples who trust them—especially since the relationship between gurus and their disciples is based on a one-sided awe and admiration. The Mother teaches her devotees to be independent of established religions, nations etc., but not of her. The strength that she offers them, to make them stronger in their quest for enlightenment, is addictive. More importantly, as she establishes herself as the mediator between the disciple and their enlightenment, in her absence this structure falls apart. Without the guru, the devotee is forever lost. This negative aspect of the guru-disciple relationship is best illustrated in the struggles that Matteo endures in his pursuit of the Mother.

Matteo's obsession with India ends when he finds the Mother's ashram.<sup>316</sup> There he learns that gurus can be multifaceted and that enlightenment is a life-long quest. But this

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<sup>315</sup> As Minor notes: "When asked how people with different values can live and work together in harmony, her [Sri Ma's] answer was that they could do so through a deeper harmony than that which could be envisioned by organizations that define unity superficially" (55).

<sup>316</sup> Out of all the disciples, the novel closely follows Matteo and Sophie's journey. I suggest that Desai intends to show both the negative and positive sides of the Mother's power/charm over her

knowledge does not prevent him from becoming completely dependent on the Mother. He is incapable of functioning in her brief absences: “Only during the *darshan*, in the Mother’s presence, he and everything else came alive” (108). The word *darshan* is usually used to describe the moment that a devotee sees god. The usage of the word conveys the Mother’s divinity. Everything else is animated only if it is connected to this divinity, which thus has both the power to grant life and to take it away.

Matteo is strengthened by what the Mother teaches him. As he learns, the journey to salvation is littered with hindrances and his search leads him to the discovery of different Indias within India. But the Mother’s divinity also handicaps him. Matteo is unable to love his own family. Sophie and their two children become a burden to him, and “any time spent away from the Mother, without her, [is] wasted time” (108). Whenever possible he tries to be in the company of the Mother, always “waiting to be summoned” into action (108). While his veneration for the Mother increases, his marriage disintegrates. As Sophie asks Matteo: “Why is the ordinary not enough for you? Home, family, a child?” (141). The ordinary ceases to be real, and the world of enlightenment that the guru directs him becomes his actual goal. Even when Sophie realizes that Matteo is not concerned about his family she finds it hard to leave the ashram, which she believes is not the only Ithaca.<sup>317</sup> She realizes that life, as they know it, is possible because of the ashram. Sophie and Matteo are dependent on their parents financially and do not have any other source of income. Since the Mother does not ask for money, their stay in India is possible. Unlike the disciples of the other gurus, the Mother’s devotees are financially

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disciples. Sophie and Matteo initially resemble the European youths depicted in Dev Anand’s 1971 Hindi film *Hare Rama and Hare Krishna*—where drug induced, temporary enlightenment seems to be the main quest. In this novel, drugs are not used, but the frenzy surrounding India is identical.

<sup>317</sup> For Sophie, India is exotic, full of colorful sights and scenes. Since it is so far away from Germany, the land also becomes a symbol of freedom. She can do anything she pleases without any parental constraints. But it is not everything to her.



dependent on her. None of her devotees work outside of the ashram. The sense of financial freedom/independence that Sophie cherishes is now proved to be false.

When Matteo struggles with his responsibilities as a husband and a father, he seeks the Mother's advice. She does not provide a clear answer: "You are not absorbed in family life, Matteo. I have only to look at your pure and shining face to know it is not so... Your roots may be in the mud but your petals are pure" (138). By praising the purity and the glow, and by comparing his family life to mud, the Mother suggests that she believes that Matteo's enlightenment should involve a complete rejection of his family. Although this incriminates the Mother, families are allowed to stay, work and learn at the ashram. Matteo's journey is possibly different from the other men who have families, but Matteo's separation from his family does not prove very beneficial. The guru is human for all her divinity, and when she dies Matteo completely breaks down: "He wouldn't eat, or drink and he wept so much... Then he just got up one day and told us he would travel north to the mountains where the Mother received enlightenment" (304). The sense of loss and sorrow that he feels leave him incapable of attending to the most basic and natural needs of his body.

Forgetting the self is one of the classic symptoms of a disciple who cannot envision himself without the guru. Even the enlightenment Matteo seeks must be from the same source as his guru's. He goes back to the place where the Mother attained enlightenment, but it is never clear whether Matteo is finally able to transcend the pettiness of his world. Particularly since Matteo's son, Giacomo, sees what is probably a vision of his father in somewhat insane terms. As Giacomo tells his sister: "he [Matteo] was wearing just a white cloth, tied like an apron. No shoes. Nothing else... He talks – like a foreigner" (307). This may be the enlightened Matteo, however, critics like Mrinalini Solanki have argued otherwise. Solanki writes that Matteo's

“ignorance, his limiting of consciousness in the form of the Mother, alienating himself from his surroundings hamper his growth, his free thinking” (54). Ironically, the ashram had been set up to encourage “free thinking.” The Matteo that we meet at the end of the novel may well have lost his mind in the pursuit of the enlightenment.

Not everyone, however, is helpless in the face of such magnetism. While Matteo works as a devotee, Sophie shuns the power the guru has over her husband.<sup>318</sup> For Sophie, the Mother is initially a “hypnotist” and a “magician” (107). Or even “a monster spider who had spun this web [the ashram] to catch these silly flies [the devotees]” (127). Her accusation that the Mother practices magic is not completely moot. Sri Aurobindo and Sri Ma’s spiritual philosophies particularly involve occultism—which is “generally regarded with distrust and disbelief, and associated with black magic, witches on broomsticks and grotesque demons” (Vrekhem 34). However, the negativity associated with black magic is not relevant to their practices. For both Sri Aurobindo and Sri Ma occultism is “progressive science” that granted the ability to understand how invisible forces—those beyond the realm of the vision of the ordinary senses of man—shaped and affected the life of man (Vrekhem 35). Although we never see the Mother practice any magic, since Desai modeled her on Sri Ma there is a possibility that some magic may be involved. This explains the Mother’s hold on some of her disciples and the often-spectacular homages that nature pays to her. Such moments also treble the Mother’s charm and despite the guru’s good intentions, her charisma is addictive. Unfortunately, the charisma and the promise of enlightenment can be all consuming.

Disciples often consider their guru to be perfect and are blind to any shortcomings of their idol. Matteo is no different. For example, he is unaware that his guru too had journeyed to

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<sup>318</sup> Coincidentally, Sri Ma’s brother’s name was also Matteo. Their journeys are similar to the Mother’s in that they are on a spiritual quest.

India for spiritual freedom. In her naiveté and ignorance, the Mother in her early years in India helplessly searched for a guide. As she writes in her diary: “*Outside I hear the trams in the street and blind beggars wailing. Where is the river, the scented grove, the jasmine garlands? Where is the music of flutes and the sounds of conch?*” (285).<sup>319</sup> India seems to be a great disappointment and “The scenes in Europe are as bejeweled and romantic...as those in India are pockmarked and intrusive” (Iyer 170). Young Laila, however, soon realizes that the Indian spirituality she is looking for is not in the rivers and groves: “*My search is not over. I must continue it. O where is my Lord?*” (285). This moment is important, as this is the first time she realizes that her search does not end with her arrival in India. As she writes further: “*I thought...that once on Indian soil we would dwell in a temple of devotion. But it is not so*” (285). Both the Mother and Matteo have this pondering, meditative eye. Perhaps what awaits Matteo at the end of his journey is wisdom like the Mother’s. But he pays the price for his vision to see beyond the confines of his immediate life after the Mother’s death.

In an effort to understand why the Mother has an incredibly strong hold on her husband, Matteo, Sophie retraces the guru’s steps. She travels to Bombay to the *Krishna School of Dance* to meet the Mother’s old dance troupe leader.<sup>320</sup> Sophie steals the Mother’s diary, and the contents of it finally help her to understand “why the Mother went on that pilgrimage, why anyone goes on a pilgrimage, and why she must go too” (305).<sup>321</sup> The novel ends with what seems to be Sophie’s sincere understanding of spirituality and her husband. Chatterjee argues that that the journeys in the novel made by the Mother, Sophie and Matteo are a reversal of the colonial model: “During the period of western imperial expansion the idea of a journey through

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<sup>319</sup> It is in italics in the original.

<sup>320</sup> Krishna is now “a shrunken creature whose grey skin hangs in folds from his spare form...his jaw droops onto his chest...his sparse white hair falls onto his shoulders” (277).

<sup>321</sup> But hers is a more general notion that pilgrimage may be had anywhere.

unknown lands satisfied an appetite for novelty and expanding horizons...the characters who undertake the journey in this novel echo Odysseus's long journey to his homeland Ithaca which is a symbol of rest after the hardships and toils of the journey" (125). As I have pointed out in the introduction to this project, Swami Vivekananda first reversed the colonial model—the East is now the West's "homeland." Gurus, like the Mother, have continued to do the same. Thus although Sophie initially rejects India as her Ithaca, she embraces her Indian experiences in the end.

The idea of the ashram as the "unfettered vacuum," which I refer to in the start of this chapter, is commendable but: "As a result of the flattening of the contours of nation, race and religion the concept of the unfettered vacuum also characterizes emptiness" (Chatterjee 124). Although as long as the Mother is alive there is no void within her devotees, her death creates havoc. When Sophie visits the ashram after the Mother's death, she is shocked by what she sees:

the gate...is standing open...she senses abandonment and loss in the air; everything is left hanging loosely, no longer held together and cared for. There are flowers in the beds still, but wilted, unwatered, and fruit on the trees, but unpicked, left to rot. Many of the cottages seem to be deserted: there is no washing hanging around them, no children playing. (303)

The breakdown of the ashram after the Mother's death suggests that whatever knowledge the guru imparted to her devotees has perhaps been forgotten. The ashram is devoid of any meaning without the Mother. As Chatterjee suggests, the Ithaca that Desai's characters find "insists on the ephemeral nature of its own existence" (125).<sup>322</sup> Whereas Sri Ma's Auroville survives to this day, the Mother's ashram falls to pieces.

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<sup>322</sup> Summarizing Desai's main point, Chatterjee writes: "one is wrong in assuming that by travelling east one would already have recreated one's borderless universe, in which unhindered free mobility is the natural way of being. In the inevitable incessant journeying of Desai's postcolonial characters, borders still are a painful reality" (129).

Caught between the regressive ways of those who perpetuated the Babri Masjid demolition and the metaphorical/romantic colonial idea of British India, I suggest that Desai tries to provide a vision for the future where a figure like the Mother is crucial. In the presence of the right-minded spiritual/political leaders, the country can overcome all internal tensions between its varied people.<sup>323</sup> In an India where charismatic leaders, whether political or spiritual, have always had serious fan following, Desai's message is significant. In the Mother's absence, however, Desai predicts a country without hope. Thus depending on a spiritual teacher or a guru is not enough. The guru does not grant enlightenment. The devotee's incessant search for enlightenment is the real reward. The Mother's last lesson is this: "Ithaca has given you a beautiful voyage/ Without her you would never have taken the road...And if you have found her poor, Ithaca has not defrauded you./ With such great wisdom you have gained, with so much experience/ you must surely have understood by then what Ithacas mean" (Preface).<sup>324</sup>

*Journey to Ithaca* illustrates that Guruism today is not limited to Hindus alone. To be a guru one does not have to be a Hindu by birth, nor do they have to be male. In this age of globalization, anyone can become a guru as long as they are able to teach spirituality. The Mother and her effect on her disciples are both good and bad. However, through the Mother's Guruism, Desai resists the concept of secular religion that threatens to rip India apart. The freedom that "eternal religion" bestows is essential for democracy in Desai's India.

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<sup>323</sup> Even political leaders such as Indira Gandhi have bowed down to spiritual gurus. Both Mrs. Gandhi and her mother were disciples of Sri Anandamoyi Ma. The real struggle in contemporary, postcolonial India is from surviving the tug of war between the regressive ideas about India, present both in romanticized depictions of India and the Hindu Nationalist ideology that strives to construct India as Hindu only. Both are equally undesirable.

<sup>324</sup> Ganesh, Devan and Chukker are not really concerned with enlightenment, though they sometimes appear to entice their disciples with the promise of it. Their disciples are, however, not looking for enlightenment either.

## CONCLUSION

“Whatever form a new worldview takes, whatever its content and values, if the process of creating or maintaining it is authoritarian, it will not really be new... Whatever else a new paradigm is about, it must gain the allegiance of people through consensus, not fiat... it is essential for any viable model to promote people trusting themselves sufficiently to value their own experiences, instead of accepting unexamined options and values.”<sup>325</sup>

My project, and the questions I examine through it, stem from my interest in Hindu spirituality and gurus. I come from a religious family. Although we are not orthodox Hindus, religion still occupies a good part of our lives. This is also true of the people I grew up with and the communities I saw around me. And this is one of the reasons why researching the novels has not been easy. My family has had a connection with Sri Ma’s (the guru on whom Desai models the Mother) ashram in Pondicherry, and I have struggled with identifying any negative traits in the Mother’s Guruism. There have been other hindrances to this project as well. *The Wizard Swami* and *The Sensuous Guru* have little to no criticism on them. Articles on *The Mystic Masseur* often only comment on the satire in the novels and do not examine the gurus as serious subjects. In my assessment of these three novels, I have found that the satire is evident and the comedy is delightful. But there is an underlying story behind each guru’s spiritual/political

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<sup>325</sup> Kramer and Alstad, 2. Through globalization, as cultures approach a saturation point, nations tend to become increasingly homogenous and cultural boundaries are more relaxed. As Iyer suggests: “A common multiculturalism links us all—call it Planet Hollywood, Planet Reebok or the United Colors of Benetton. Taxi and hotel and disco are universal terms now, but so too are karaoke and yoga and pizza” (224). Gurus need to tap into this “common multiculturalism” since no culture exists in isolation. Cultures tend to transform by penetrating and “updating” each other and that which is culture for one nation is not always entirely different from the culture of another. Also, “Contemporary ethnography...has rejected the reductive notions of culture as *dwelling* in favour of a wider definition of culture as *multilocal*” (Raghuram, Sahoo 2). Globalization has given birth to a “world culture”—aspects of which most cultures will find common grounds with.

journey. This project has focused on these stories, as it attempts to understand these seemingly superficial, yet charismatic leaders. My readings of these texts are positive, and I hope that future readers of these novels will take into account the struggles through which identity formation occurs in postcolonial countries (especially as illustrated in *The Mystic Masseur* and *The Wizard Swami*). To that extent, I have highlighted some of the historical and cultural underpinnings that contribute to the gurus' personalities.

The world that the gurus create through religious networks caters both to the local and the transnational markets of spirituality. This world is both imaginary (since it is firmly ensconced within the mind of the disciples, and the resulting of the networks are not necessarily concrete) and real (through the networks that are tangible). The happiness that the guru brings to his disciples remains, and the networks continue to function in the guru's absence. The religioscapes ultimately help people, in one way or another, and this makes the gurus authentic. As I have suggested throughout the project, much of the gurus' powers come from their disciples.<sup>326</sup> Ganesh, Devan, Chukker and the Mother have some amount of following, and this is proof that they have a certain power.

While writing this project, I have thought about how South Asian gurus at "home" would differ from those in the diaspora.<sup>327</sup> In 2008, in an article on India, I found a real-life model of the Guruism I have described in this project. Ramkishan Yadav, or Swami Ramdev as his disciples in India popularly know him, announced his intentions to contest the national elections. I found startling similarities between the careers of Swami Ramdev and the gurus examined in

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<sup>326</sup> Apart from the Mother, Ganesh, Devan and Chukker become gurus almost overnight. This is in contrast to the number of years or lifetimes the gurus in the *Mahabharata* or the *Ramayana* need. Gurus "had by centuries of Tapasya [devotion, study and meditation] at first acquainted the title of 'Muni' or 'Rsi,' and then after another hundred or thousand years received initiation in Yoga from a Devata [God], or some great Yogi like a Devata" (Woodroffe 234).

<sup>327</sup> I have considered adding a chapter on the home gurus by analyzing R. K. Narayan's *The Guide* and Kiran Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*.

this project. The Swami, who had started out as student of Yoga, made the promotion of yoga his mission. The Swami's congregation is so large that he often teaches yoga in stadiums or on national television. Strengthened by this mass following, the Swami has set up the *Bharat Swabhiman Party* and "plans to do for the body politic what he has already done to the country's creaky physiques: whip it into shape. He announced last month that he would found a political party that would field candidates for each of the 543 parliamentary seats in India's next general election in 2014" (Polgreen).

Like the gurus in this project, Swami Ramdev calls for return to the roots. He is averse to everything foreign and asks his followers to boycott foreign goods, lifestyle and philosophies. He laments that: "India has relied too much on the system of government it inherited from its British colonizers and lost the traditional systems of governing that held sway for centuries" (Polgreen). Asking his followers to: "'Speak Indian languages. Wear Indian clothes. Drink Indian drinks.' All things foreign, he argues, like Coca-Cola and hamburgers, pollute the Indian spirit and weaken it" (Polgreen). Although Swami Ramdev's political policies are not clearly stated, there are many who revere him.

As Polgreen writes: "These [the Swami's] views have touched a chord with his followers, many of them from the striving lower middle class who find themselves torn between tradition and the allure of modern life." Like the gurus in this project, Swami Ramdev too has taken control of infrastructure and the means through which knowledge is disseminated. For example, Polgreen writes that: "From the campus of his organization, the *Patanjali Yogpeeth Trust*, he oversees a growing empire. Here, on the outskirts of Haridwar, he has a hospital and an ayurvedic medical school and research institution, which teach an ancient system of natural healing, as well as a vast agricultural and processing operation that cranks out everything from



shampoo to juice and herbal supplements.” His popularity has begun to spread beyond India and he has plans to “cure” the world too.<sup>328</sup> To that end, the Swami has bought a Scottish island for two million pounds.<sup>329</sup> In sharp contrast to the Swami is Deepak Chopra, for example, who fuses psychology with medicine and modern science. He instructs his followers to balance their chakras (centers of energy located in seven different points of the human body) for emotional/mental peace and good health. According to Chopra, diseases can be cured through chakra balancing and there is no need to go to a doctor. However, unlike Swami Ramdev, Chopra does not dabble in politics.

I have also thought about the “home” that Ganesh, Devan and their communities long for. I left India six years ago, and whenever I go back I see that the country is rapidly changing—sometimes beyond recognition. The “home” that the South Asian diasporas in Naipaul and Dabydeen’s novels think about is no longer there. Dhoti-clad, Hare Krishna chanting, Westerners are becoming a more common sight in India than the long-haired *sannyasis*. Most of these Westerners have created a new culture of worship in India. Richard Slavin, for example, born to middle class Jewish-American parents, has changed his name to Radhanath Swami and calls India home.<sup>330</sup> People like Slavin are redefining terms like “home” and are playing a very important role in deciding who should be in it. For a diasporic South Asian, returning “home” could well mean returning to this revised, globalized home, where they will be sharing their “home” with people like Slavin.

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<sup>328</sup> As Polgreen writes: “Lately, his international profile has been on the rise. He has led yoga classes for huge crowds in Nepal, Japan, the United States and elsewhere. ‘Now I see the light after the night,’ he said. ‘If India is saved, then the whole world will be saved.’”

<sup>329</sup> See “Swami Ramdev Founds Scotland ‘Peace Island,’ Challenges Bikram for Title of Yoga ‘Don’”: <<http://www.yogadork.com/news/swami-ramdev-founds-scotland-peace-island-challenges-bikram-for-title-of-yoga-don/>>

<sup>330</sup> Richard Slavin is the author of *The Journey Home* (2008). Slavin has a huge following.

In the novels discussed in this project, India is trapped in the diasporic individual's mind—more importantly, located within the mind in a certain time and place. This trapped India is only a memory and is not verifiable nor will it ever be. This India is susceptible to constant redefinitions, as the mind remembers, forgets and then re-remembers the characteristics of it. Needless to say that this memory of India is unreliable, however, it is still important as it explains the diasporic individual's present place by locating their origins and by providing a history. In the diaspora, the need for Guruism stems from a longing for the “home” and for a need to make a “home” out of the diaspora.

In the process, these gurus bring about a mutual redefinition of the epistemologies of the home and the diaspora. The original home is not really a home—as the conventional meaning of the term demands a physical presence. For the diaspora, home is not where the heart is, but where the ancestors were. The diaspora can be “homed” (made like the original home by extrapolating certain aspects of home into it), but the impulse to “home” the diaspora oddly results in alienating it. This is because the diaspora cannot be fully rejected since it is the new home. Arguably, therefore, Guruism may be necessary although a reformed version of it is obviously more desirable. In Naipaul's *Trinidad and Dabydeen's Guyana*, the youth are perhaps in need of some social/cultural guidance. In Naipaul's words: “There is an ignorance of the Indian community not only from without, but also from within.”<sup>331</sup> The Guruism of the diasporic gurus can be one of the ways to be educated about the Indian self. If gurus focus on appreciating diversity, they might be the guides that postcolonial youth require.<sup>332</sup>

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<sup>331</sup> This is part of Naipaul's opening speech in a conference in 1975 on East Indians in the Caribbean, St. Augustine Campus of the University of the West Indies. See Brereton and Dookeran.

<sup>332</sup> Yet if we allow religion and religious leaders to remain significant in our lives, we should at least take away their protected status—gurus and religion should be challenged and discussed. There are many who live without gurus and see devotion to gurus as a disease—the deprogrammers for instance.

In “Freedom From Domination in the Future” Edward Said quotes Michael Barratt-Brown. According to Said, Brown “argues ‘that imperialism is still without a question a most powerful force in the economic, political and military relations by which the less economically developed lands are subjected to the more economically developed land’” (282).<sup>333</sup> Guruism seems to have reversed the situation and perpetuated a new form of imperialism, where the power that the gurus exert is “soft power,” but “less” spiritually developed minds are subjected to the “more” spiritually developed minds.<sup>334</sup>

To illustrate how this “soft” power works at “home,” I will very briefly recount here the several meetings that my family and I had last winter with an extremely well known and revered guru. When I went to visit my parents in India, I was introduced to this guru (I prefer not to name him). He arrived in our neighbor’s apartment and stayed for a week. The guru’s arrival was no secret, and the entire apartment complex was protected by security throughout his stay. He was accessible only to the elite in the building, and the general public was not allowed to see him. My parents, as residents of the apartment complex, visited the guru often. Every time they came back with stories of his grace, the calm on his face, the number of high profile devotees who were ready to do anything for him, the garlands and the incense sticks brought to worship him, the festival-like atmosphere of the place and the special vegetarian meals cooked for the guru and those who came to see him. Both businessmen and politicians offered their services. They asked to print the guru’s business cards for free, or to host many of his congregation at their own expenses. Some wished to organize the guru’s travel plans and arranged to inform the community of his planned whereabouts. Instant messages were sent and as phones beeped

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<sup>333</sup> From *Culture and imperialism*.

<sup>334</sup> In a talk given on November 2009 in Mysore, India, for TED the Indian minister of state for external affairs Shashi Tharoor refers to India’s “soft power” and talks about the “attraction of India’s culture.” For Tharoor, India is “the land of the better story.” India’s story is attractive and the gurus create fictions about Hinduism and possess “soft power.”

announcing the guru's next plan everybody vowed to schedule their life around his highness. The guru had his charisma—as all gurus do.

My own observations confirmed my parents' stories, but I was fascinated by another part of the guru's visit. During one of my stops to the apartment where the guru stayed, I noticed that many sought *diksha* from him, as did some of my family. *Diksha*, or divine touch, is a kind of initiation process where energy passes from the guru to the disciple in various forms. In order to complete the initiation process, the disciple may either be required to recite certain mantras all his life, or change his lifestyle in a significant fashion. The latter could, for example, involve giving up certain foods. I remember seeing the faces of people both before and after the *diksha*.<sup>335</sup> The complete trust in the guru was evident. Through *diksha*, guru and disciple are forever bonded with each other. The disciples now became part of an invisible network that would work to keep the guru in the center. This is similar to the structure of Guruism that I have explained so far.

From priest kings to prophet soldiers, to patronizing spiritual emperors, to militant monks and holy humans who sway entire populations, religion is a power that has shaped history and continues to determine the future. As we march into a world where science attempts to explain everything—often demystifying the myths that have shaped thought processes, ethics and value systems—it is hard to find a *raison d'être*. Additionally, as Huston Smith argues, “Since the disestablishment of religion, the West has been unable to come up with a convincing theory of political responsibility...no merely utilitarian definition of civic loyalty is going to persuade anyone that it makes sense for him to die for his country or even report his taxable income

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<sup>335</sup> I did not see the guru giving *diksha* to anyone, since it is given privately and may not be witnessed by all.

honestly” (xiii).<sup>336</sup> Religion explains the “Beginning” and provides the reassuring end that we do not lose everything with death. In other words, religion sugarcoats life and there is nothing like diabetes in the religious worldview. However, as I conclude from my project, religious leaders, like gurus, can galvanize the masses for multiple purposes. The inner workings of the minds of gurus and god-humans, and the processes through which they harness and interpret religion, are interesting because they reveal the mechanisms through which societies function.

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<sup>336</sup> Introduction, *Spirit Matters*.

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## APPENDIX: PERMISSIONS

TigerMail Mail - Request for Letter of Permission

<https://mail.google.com/a/tigers.lsu.edu/?ui=2&ik=dc5c4b2fb0&vie...>



Sukanya Gupta <[sgupta3@tigers.lsu.edu](mailto:sgupta3@tigers.lsu.edu)>

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### Request for Letter of Permission

2 messages

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**Sukanya Gupta** <[sgupta3@tigers.lsu.edu](mailto:sgupta3@tigers.lsu.edu)>

Sun, Apr 10, 2011 at 9:13 AM

To: [kverma@pitt.edu](mailto:kverma@pitt.edu)

Dear Professor Verma,

I request your permission to publish a version of the article titled "In Search of "Destiny": The "Haas" Doper in Cyril Dabydeen's *The Wizard Swami*." The article was published in September/October 2009 in the *South Asian Review* for the special topics issue.

I require a letter of permission to reprint from the *South Asian Review* publication. The article appears as a chapter in my dissertation on gurus and Hinduism. I have, however, titled it differently in the dissertation and some parts of the article have been re-written

Hope you are well.

Thank you,  
Sukanya.

--

=====  
Sukanya Gupta  
Graduate Teaching Assistant & Candidate for the PhD  
Department of English  
Louisiana State University  
260 Allen Hall  
Baton Rouge, LA 70803  
Office: (225) 578-2834  
Email: [sgupta3@tigers.lsu.edu](mailto:sgupta3@tigers.lsu.edu)  
=====

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**KVERMA@pitt.edu** <[KVERMA@pitt.edu](mailto:KVERMA@pitt.edu)>

Thu, Apr 14, 2011 at 10:17 AM

To: Sukanya Gupta <[sgupta3@tigers.lsu.edu](mailto:sgupta3@tigers.lsu.edu)>

>Dear Ms. Gupta,

Thank you for your email. Herebelow is the permission you requested.

Permission is hereby granted to reprint your article "In Search of 'Destiny': The 'Haas' Doper in Cyril Dabydeen's *The Wizard Swami*" that appeared in the 2009 Special Topic Issue of the *South Asian Review*, Volume 30, Number 1, pp. 142-166. I will appreciate if you acknowledge the source and if you send us a copy of reprinted piece for our records.

Are you finished with your Ph. D.? Will you ask your library to subscribe to the *South Asian Review*?

With best wishes.

Sincerely,

K. D. Verma  
Editor, SAR

Dear Professor Verma,

>

> I request your permission to publish a version of the article titled "In

> Search

> of "Destiny": The "Haas" Doper in Cyril Dabydeen's The Wizard Swami." The

> article was published in September/October 2009 in the \*South Asian

> Review\*for

> the special topics issue.

>

> I require a letter of permission to reprint from the S\*outh Asian Review\*

[Quoted text hidden]

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## VITA

In 2005 Sukanya Gupta attained a master's degree in English from Calcutta University and a postgraduate diploma in mass communication from Jadavpur University. She traveled to the United States in August 2005 to pursue her doctorate in the department of English at Louisiana State University. She received full funding in the form of a graduate teaching assistantship, and this made her dreams possible. Her publications appear in *South Asian Review*, *Connecticut Review*, *Colonization or Globalization? Postcolonial Exploration of Imperial Expansion* and *Jadavpur University Essays and Studies*. After graduating from LSU in August 2011, Sukanya will join University of Southern Indiana as a tenure-track faculty member.