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"She's an All-in-One Guru": Devotion to a 21st century Mystic

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ABSTRACT

“She’s an All-in-One Guru”: Devotion to a 21st century Mystic

Anandmurti Gurumaa is a multi-lingual teacher of meditation and “spirituality” situated at the intersection of Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi and Sikh mystical traditions. This dissertation, employing inter-disciplinary methodology, provides an in-depth study of Gurumaa and her rapidly developing, disciple-driven transnational spiritual movement. I introduce Gurumaa and her circle of devotees within the cultural context of globetrotting Indian gurus and examine issues of tradition and innovation in her mission. Through ethnographic writing, I specifically turn to examples of Gurumaa’s pluralism, gender activism and embrace of new media to discuss continuity and change within the tradition of *guru-bhakti* (devotion to the guru). Because Gurumaa embraces rhetoric of “female empowerment,” and points to her own “enlightened” female body as evidence that women can and do reach the highest spiritual states, her leadership offers an ideal context in which to consider emerging gendered re-interpretations of “tradition” in the new global religious milieu.

“She’s an All-in-One Guru”: Devotion to a 21st century Mystic

by

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B.A., Davidson College, 1989
M. A., Cornell University, 2004

Dissertation

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Religion.

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I spent most of my time in the research field with Gurumaa's devotees. Though absolutely integral to this study and deserving of my gratitude, they cannot be named here because many appear in this dissertation. Devotees in India and in the US welcomed me into their homes and even into their hearts as they shared with me their stories of the guru-disciple relationship. In the ashram, where there was less time for talk, many full-time ashram residents helped me with practical aspects of this research, especially in welcoming my children and making them feel at home: introducing them to the newborn calves; cleaning wounds when accidents happened; offering something non-spicy to eat; sharing Gurumaa's chocolate birthday cake; teasing in a grandfatherly way; and teaching the delights of sugar cane grown in the ashram fields, to name only a few. There was no shortage of love offered in all settings of this research, whether it was expressed by a devotee taking my child under his wing and training him to be a saint (also allowing me to get some work done), by providing assistance with song lyric translations, in chanting the Mahāmṛtyuṅjaya (great death conquering) Mantra with

me while riding a scooter through dangerous streets at night, by introducing me to different saints, in helping me with shopping errands, or in singing a devotional song directly in front of my face with eyes penetrating my being. My appreciation for the love, research material and hospitality offered by devotees is greater than I can express in words.

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rank to include undergraduates in the conversation, and for her encouraging me to write for an audience broader than my committee and beyond the academy.

Suggestions my advisors and others have made have often been incorporated into my writing without further acknowledgement.

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My undergraduate advisor Bill Mahony sparked my interest in the academic study of religion, encouraged me to take my first journey to India in 1987 and guided me as a Religion major at Davidson College. His continued guidance, friendship and interest in my work have provided immeasurable inspiration. Our discussions have greatly informed this study. Elizabeth Mills, English Professor at Davidson College and trusted mentor, encouraged me to ask Gurumaa for advice about my headaches, and later talked me through a serious writing block, the immediate results of which began Chapter 5. Daniel Gold, my MA advisor at Cornell University, introduced me to Indian devotional poetry. Early in this project he provided key guidance. I later found myself

fully engaged with his published work on the north Indian *sants*, and I very much appreciated his presence at two of my conference presentations.

I have shared portions of this research at the American Academy of Religion National Meeting in Chicago; the Asia Research Institute (ARI) at Singapore University; the Annual Conference on South Asia in Madison; the Fulbright Scholars' Conference in Kolkata; and the South Asia Center at Syracuse University's Moynihan Institute of Global Affairs. I received helpful responses from participants at of each of these events. Graduate students in Ann Gold's seminar, Writing Religions and Cultures, read and commented on an early draft of a chapter of this dissertation. Their questions helped me to articulate my methodology section.

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For Nancy McBride Rudert
and Edward H. Rudert

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Introductions.....	1
“All-in-One Guru”	
Context and Themes of the Study	
Layers of “Conversation” and Transmission	
Attraction: Call and Response	
Organization of this Study	
A <i>Sant</i> and a Scholar	
Methods in the Buddhafield	
Chapter 2: Gurus and Disciples.....	52
Introductions	
Sahajo Bai	
A “Heavy” Word: Guru	
Ancient Discourse and Myth Models	
<i>Sants</i> , Sufis, Sikhs and Others	
Divine Attraction	
Words and the Attractive Force of Wisdom	
The Guru’s Call of Love	
In Relationship with the Guru	
Guru is Mother, Father, All Relations	
Guru as Beloved, Guru as God	
The Guru’s Grace: <i>Kripa</i>	
Conclusions	

Chapter 3: What’s New about New Age Gurus?.....	117
Gurus as Innovators	
Self-Spirituality in a “New Age”	
Universalism and Democratization	
Gurus: Divine, Realized and Gendered	
“Worldly” Gurus	
Conclusion	
Chapter 4: A Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi, Sikh TV Guru.....	142
Introduction	
Body as Place, Body as Stage	
Spiritual Seekers and Pluralism in Gurumaa’s Circle	
Conclusion – “ <i>Mera Dil hai Hindustani</i> ”	
Chapter 5: Shakti’s New Voice.....	175
Introduction	
Embodying Shakti, the Transformative Power	
Gurumaa’s Song: “ <i>Suno Suno</i> ” (Listen!)	
Power, Empowerment and the Meaning of Words	
Taking Flight	
A “Lady Guru” and a “Ladies’ Guru”	
“A Room of One’s Own”	
Ushering in a New Age, Music Video Style	
Chapter 6: New Media, Same Old Magic: “This is the <i>Siddhi</i> ”	224
Introductions	

Amrit Varsha: the Rain of Nectar

“Lo Behold! We have Live Chat:” Q and A in a New Age

Magical Powers

Tossing the Bottle or Casting the Net

Conclusions

Chapter 7: Conclusions.....	253
Appendix.....	266
Bibliography.....	270
Secondary Sources	
Primary Sources	
Works by Anandmurti Gurumaa and Gurumaa Vani	
Works by other Modern Spiritual Teachers	
Vita.....	280

CHAPTER 1 Introductions

“All-in-one guru”

In July 2006 in Hudson Valley, NY, a prominent Indian American disciple described her Guruji to me as her “all-in-one guru,” insisting that Anandmurti Gurumaa (hereafter also referred to simply as Gurumaa) is everything she looks for in a spiritual master.¹ Other disciples around us nodded at the “all-in-one” moniker and elaborated: She is “an enlightened master,” and “a beautiful musician;” “she does a lot to help girls in India.” I mentioned that Gurumaa’s discourse seemed intelligent and humorous and they confirmed her wit as the norm. Part of Gurumaa’s appeal is accessibility: “she returns our emails;” she “chats online;” and one disciple said, “in India she draws 80,000 people, but here, we see her among a few hundred.” For this group of busy professional women of the Indian diaspora (doctors, dentists and business owners) whose lives have long been embedded in the US, it seems that Gurumaa is indeed an “all-in-one guru.”

Gurumaa is a multi-talented, multi-lingual teacher of meditation and “spirituality” situated at the intersection of Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi and Sikh mystical traditions, whose discourses and musical compositions address the global fusion of linguistic, cultural and religious sensibilities encountered by her (mostly) urban disciples. Gurumaa’s enlightened status and charismatic presence, her polished

¹ Gurumaa is not to be confused with Gurumayi Chidvilasananda of the Siddha Yoga movement known familiarly as “Gurumayi.” There are other gurus known as “Gurumaa” as well. For example, Madhobi Ma from Delhi, is called Guru Ma by her followers (Charpentier 2010). Countless gurus similarly have formal Sanskrit titles with the term *ānanda*, meaning bliss, including two other female gurus of prominence, Anandamayi Ma and Mata Amritanandamayi. At gurumaa.com, Anandmurti is translated as “an embodiment of divine bliss” and Gurumaa as “Master Mother.” Throughout, I follow the practice of Gurumaa’s organization (and others) in not using diacritical marks in hers and in other gurus’ names. In the short title, Gurumaa, the long ā sound is indicated with “aa” in publications and on the website www.gurumaa.com. The long ā sound in ānand, however, is not indicated in writing, and the short “a” sound at the end of ānanda is often left out altogether, in written and spoken form. For the sake of readers’ mental pronunciation, the name sounds like Ānandmūrtī Gurumā.

performative style, and the global accessibility of her teaching through content, language, geographic and technological proximity, do combine to make a *weighty* package of “spiritual treasures” offered through the body of just one woman.²

In this dissertation, I demonstrate that Gurumaa, an innovative female guru, remains grounded in Indian religiosity while at the same time she challenges notions of what scholars and spiritual seekers alike might call “tradition.” Through ethnographic fieldwork in Gurumaa’s ashram in India and among her disciples in various locations in India and the United States, along with an examination of “textual” sources (the materials Gurumaa publishes for her continually growing audience), I offer observations which reflect on larger issues in the study of contemporary religion.³ Thus, I look in detail at one female guru and her movement in order to shed light on a prominent current in the stream of religious sensibilities at this moment in history: the integration and balance of what is old and what is new by charismatic religious leaders. Keeping this broad aim in mind, more specifically, this study offers an entry to the world of devotion (*bhakti*) to the spiritual teacher (*guru*) known as *guru-bhakti* by way of a vibrant 21st century example. Information about Gurumaa’s life is scant, and until very recently has been available only from insider-publications such as gurumaa.com or in bios provided in books authored by Anandmurti Gurumaa and published internally by Gurumaa Vani.⁴ Marie-Thérèse Charpentier, an Indologist from Sweden very recently

² In a public talk in Secaucus, New Jersey (May 12, 2007), Gurumaa described her teaching role as sharing her “spiritual treasures” with her disciples. *Guru* can be translated as “heavy” or “weighty.” This along with other meanings of the term *guru* will be discussed in the following chapter.

³ The ashram recently has been renamed Rishi Chaitanya Ashram, as seen at gurumaa.com. During the period of my research, the ashram was called Gurumaa Ashram. I use Gurumaa Ashram throughout the study for the purpose of better English language readability and to reflect the timing of my research.

⁴ Not at all surprisingly, people inside her organization have contributed the Wikipedia entry, “Anandmurti Gurumaa.” Though it should be noted that Wikipedia “editors”/watch dogs have worked with the author/s to keep the entry as non-biased as possible. A look at the Talk or Discussion page of the entry will reveal that conversation between authors and editors has occurred since the entry’s origin.

published an as-yet little known study, *Indian Female Gurus in Contemporary Hinduism*, based on her scholarly observations of 70 women (Charpentier 2010). In this work, Charpentier explores the phenomenon of Indian female guruhood looking at the “careers” of spiritual teachers. Among these 70 women, Charpentier includes Gurumaa as one of four “representatives” whose lives and missions receive more attention in her study.⁵ Journalists from popular news media who have written about Gurumaa have thus far relied on interviews (when granted) and internally published media. As is quite common with charismatic Indian gurus and with religious leaders more generally, information about and photographs of Gurumaa are monitored and disseminated from the inside. Gurumaa has a sharp corps of what I call “techie-disciples” (she sometimes refers to them as her “tech team”) and a couple of savvy public relations officers, all devoted spiritual seekers, who have served in the capacity of *re*-presenting their master and her teachings through various communications media.

The richest biographical information about Gurumaa, however, has come to me in scattered bits, and from various contexts: from the time I have spent living in close proximity to her in her ashram; during the time I have spent away from the ashram immersed in Gurumaa’s media productions; during the few opportunities I had to travel with her; from stories told by devotees both in the ashram and far from it; and by way of Gurumaa’s spontaneous discourses given in response to my questions (which were rarely biographical). Most gurus do not typically spend a lot of time talking about

Editors have asked for secondary-source articles outside of the ashram’s own publications (since that request popular news media articles have been provided in response).

⁵ As Charpentier notes, the seventy women she covers is not an exhaustive list of female gurus, “these seventy women should be considered the tip of an iceberg rather than an exhaustive mapping out of the phenomenon” (2010: 34). Charpentier traveled most of the subcontinent visiting the ashrams of various gurus, many of whom she met only briefly. She, however, spent a week in Gurumaa Ashram and conducted a formal interview with Gurumaa in 2006, which is one of the reasons she states for selecting Gurumaa as one of her four “representative” gurus.

themselves. From the perspective of a disciple, every word that Gurumaa utters is, in a sense, a teaching, and therefore, when she does talk about herself, it may sometimes be spoken in fun or in response to devotees' questions, but it always has a didactic purpose. It might be seen as self-indulgent for a guru to talk about herself a great deal. Meena Khandelwal experienced similar difficulties in gathering biographical narratives of female renunciators (2004). The nature of Hindu renunciation (*sannyās*), as Khandelwal and others point out, is to leave behind one's old life and begin anew. Hagiographers, biographers, journalists and scholars alike, therefore, face challenges in gathering life narratives of so-called "Self-realized" masters who do not so much identify with the small self of their embodied, material reality, but rather, the larger, universal Self. Charpentier lucidly describes such difficulties in her "Introduction" as she explores her subjects' hagiographies "in process" alongside the ideals of renunciation—namely, the ideal of leaving behind identification with the material world and social conditioning from that world (2010: 51-55). In keeping with this scattered nature of reception, which I note as parallel to the way Gurumaa's own disciples also learn about her, I present narrative details of Gurumaa's life not in any kind of formal biographical account, but rather, as woven throughout the work at points when they help illuminate relevant discussions. What follows here is a very brief account of Anandmurti Gurumaa's life and teaching mission.

Gurumaa was born by the name of Gurpreet Kaur Grover in the city of Amritsar in Punjab, India in 1966. From early childhood, she had exposure to an array of spiritual teachers, mainly, but not limited to Hindu and Sikh philosophical streams. Gurpreet was the second of four children in the Grover family and her parents chose to send her to an

English-medium Catholic convent school, something they did not offer all of their children. The resultant command of English has served Gurumaa well in her mission because of her ability to speak and be understood across cultural, economic and religious boundaries.

In her late teenage and early adult, life Gurpreet Kaur left home on an extended independent sojourn throughout north India visiting pilgrimage sites and learning from various teachers.⁶ After a significant period of time away, Gurpreet returned to Amritsar where a small group of followers, mostly Sikh and Hindu housewives attracted to her, began to call her by the honorific (male) title “Swamiji.” In those days, gatherings (*satsang*) would most often occur during the workday in homes, hosted by housewives, events somewhat more formal than the spontaneous teachings she used to offer before the time of her sojourn underneath trees outside of the schoolyard. Etymologically, the word *satsang* means a “coming together” of the “real” or “true,” and by extension is often translated as “good company.” Here, it refers to a group gathered in the company of the guru who represents and teaches that which is deemed Truth by virtue of her experience with and study of that Truth.⁷ Gurumaa would lead in call and response devotional singing (*kīrtan*) and give discourses with grounding in scriptural knowledge, referred to as “giving *jñān*,” by an Amritsar-dwelling devotee who sat among those women in the early days.⁸ While living again in Amritsar, “Swamiji” would

⁶ The pattern of making an early life sojourn throughout the subcontinent is something quite common in the biographies of male gurus, but far less so in the stories of females. This notion is further discussed in Chapter 5 of this study.

⁷ Over the course of Gurumaa’s career as a teacher, and in the context of her own disciples’ language, “*satsang*” has come to indicate specifically any of Gurumaa’s open public programs in contrast to meditation retreats (attended by registration only), known as *shivirs*, or the more private *darshan* sessions she offers in her ashram. It is worth noting that the word *satsang*, common in both Hindi and Punjabi languages, is utilized in Hindu and Sikh religious contexts.

⁸ The Indian language term for religious knowledge (Sanskrit, *jñāna*) is pronounced *gyāna* or *gyān* in most contemporary vernacular Indian languages. It is also commonly transliterated *gyān*, *gyaan* or *gyan*. A *jñānī*

return for long periods of time to Rishikesh, where she had spent time engaging in spiritual discipline (*sādhana*) during her earlier sojourn. She shortly thereafter settled and established a small hermitage nearby the bank of the river Ganga. Small groups of seekers attracted to her from various locales in north India would stay with her in the Rishikesh hermitage from time to time, sleeping right on the floor of her two-room abode.

In 1996, due to the growth of her following, the now-named Anandmurti Gurumaa began the transition to living in a larger ashram; this time she moved to Haryana by way of Delhi.⁹ Gurumaa settled in Delhi while plans solidified and her new home, hermitage and retreat center, Gurumaa Ashram, was being built just 65 kilometers north on National Highway 1, also known as Grand Trunk Road. During this time, some of her core Amritsar followers moved to Delhi to help with arrangements, and she also attracted a large number of seekers from Delhi. Shortly thereafter (approximately 1999), Gurumaa Ashram was established in the Sonapat district of Haryana, right on the major national route from Delhi to Amritsar (and on to Lahore).

is “one who has knowledge or wisdom,” specifically religious knowledge. In the Sikh context, an expert in scripture is called *giani* (sometimes also transliterated as *gyani*). In this thesis, I use the Sikh transliteration to indicate someone knowledgeable in Sikh scriptures. Otherwise, I use the transliterations *jñāna* and *jñān* to refer to religious knowledge more generally.

It is worth noting that in my English Typing assignment in the ashram, I was corrected from using what I had learned in the university as the “proper” transliteration (*jñāna*) and was told to use the “gy” instead, even when typing the name of the Maharastrian *sant* Gyaneshwar, typically seen as Jnaneshwar in English, or with diacritical marks, Jñāneśwar. My own trouble with how to use diacritical marks in this study points to a larger question in Indological scholarship: who gets to determine the correct transliterations of Indic words? Indians? Westerners? Scholars? Religious specialists? Journalists and other authors addressing popular audiences?

⁹ “Swamiji” was a name of honor and endearment given to Gurpreet Kaur Grover by her earliest disciples. Some of my interlocutors, Gurumaa’s disciples since that time, still referred to her as “Swamiji,” though sometimes corrected themselves. I have heard Gurumaa say that she did not like the feminine form of “*sādhu*,” *sādhvī* (also meaning virtuous woman or virtuous wife in Hindi), and refused to be addressed by that title. For a long while, it is said, Gurumaa rejected the title “guru” too, but eventually accepted Guru Maa. Sometime along the way, she adopted the name Anandmurti to go with Gurumaa. A close disciple inquired on my behalf and returned with the answer that disciples, not a guru, had given the name Anandmurti Gurumaa.

Gurumaa settled there, thus establishing her meditative abode—also described on gurumaa.com as “a living Buddhafield,” and as an “ultra-modern” and “serene place away from the city.” This prime location allowed householder (meaning non-ascetic) disciples from many cities in Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh as well as Delhi who had been attracted to Gurumaa over the course of her 20s and early 30s to make Gurumaa Ashram their spiritual retreat destination because they could travel to her by car, bus or train in one day. Today, as the Delhi urban sprawl heads outward in all directions, Gurumaa Ashram, still surrounded (for the moment) by wheat fields on all sides, seems ever closer to the city as it sits less than an hour’s drive away from Haryana’s newest crops: the growing number of “party lawns” hosting Delhi weddings, the “green cities” housing Delhi commuters, and the shopping malls, which all dot the historic roadway stretching across the nation’s heartland. Additionally Gurumaa’s ever-increasing number of disciples who live in other regions of India and around the globe can access the ashram easily because of its proximity to the nation’s capital.

At the request of disciples living abroad, Gurumaa made her first tour to North America and the United Kingdom in 1998, and has returned almost yearly adding new cities upon each visit.¹⁰ Gurumaa broadened her audience even more when, near the turn of this century, she began to televise her discourses, named *Amrit Varsha* (literally “rain of nectar”), four times per week on two global satellite networks, Sony TV and the

¹⁰ Disciples self-identifying as Sikh provided the anecdotal history that Gurumaa’s earliest tour occurred with assistance from a famous Sikh teacher, a television *giani*, named Sant Singh ji Maskeen. I cannot verify it. I only know that some of her early visits to Canada were made to *gurdwaras*. In my research, I have seen that as groups of Gurumaa’s followers grow in a community, an early priority is to break away from reliance on “dharmic-specific” meeting places and sites for hosting Gurumaa’s visits. It is always the goal, even a stated one. I listened as Gurumaa’s Right Hand Man explained to volunteers in Nagpur that they should find a place to meet that had no associations with religion or caste community, that the ideal place to establish their Gurumaa Meditation Center was a completely neutral meeting ground in public, civic space.

Aastha Channel (meaning Faith). As a television personality, Gurumaa immediately stands out among the growing contingent of Hindu TV gurus and Sikh TV *gianis*, first as a woman in a predominantly male world of televised religious discourses (*pravacan*), and second, because of her oratory style combining story-telling, humor and sometimes biting critique framed with devotional singing (*kīrtan* or *bhajan*) at beginning and end. Most popular media also comment on her good looks. Following an earlier line of thought by Kirin Narayan (1989), Meena Khandelwal discusses humor and beauty as pertinent factors in ascertaining a saint's acumen (2004: 163).

Gurumaa shines in the world of multilingual multi-media. Her technological savvy has proved important to followers in diaspora; many first became aware of her via her *Amrit Varsha* program on satellite TV, and some keep in touch by e-mail. During my early inquiries, I was often referred to gurumaa.com, where ostensibly, I can get “everything” I need. Indeed, in addition to gleaning a self-presentation of Gurumaa's spiritual movement, at gurumaa.com, one can watch short video clips of “Q and A,” Gurumaa's devotional songs (*bhajans*), or purchase her discourses and original music compositions in multi-media formats (including DVDs, VCDs, CDs and downloadable files) or register for G-Sandesh, Gurumaa's SMS program offering text messages to keep disciples on track with their spiritual discipline (*sādhana*).¹¹ More recently, Gurumaa's website offers links to her twitter, facebook and other social media profiles. Gurumaa produces media in both Hindi and English. She gives most discourses in Hindi, but when speaking to audiences outside of India, English can and often does become Gurumaa's register. Thus, this young female Anglophone guru has succeeded in a man's world of giving talks, writing books – even televangelizing – on a glossy high-tech global stage.

¹¹ *Sandesh* means message in Hindi.

Like many of the masters with whom Gurumaa expresses affinity – Buddha, Rumi, Kabir, Guru Nanak, and Baba Sheikh Farid – she situates her teachings and mystic path at the intersection of multiple religious sentiments rather than in any one tradition. It is not uncommon for gurus to borrow “from a wide array of traditions” (Forsthoefel and Humes 2005: 11). For Gurumaa this borrowing seems natural; she was raised in a Sikh family, educated in a Catholic convent school and attained enlightenment (which she also refers to as “buddhahood”) in Vrindavan, the famous Hindu pilgrimage site of Lord Krishna’s divine play (*līlā*), among the cowherds.¹² In an interview for a popular Mumbai-based new age magazine, *Life Positive*, Gurumaa calls herself a Sufi (Amodini 2005). Her multi-dimensional teaching has thus far brought predominantly Hindu and Sikh followers (Hindu and even Sikh religious traditions already being quite fluid and wide-ranging), but she also has some Jain, some Christian, and reportedly some Muslim followers. As I believe this study will show, given the tremendous cache of Indian spiritual expertise in the global context at this particular moment in time and given Gurumaa’s ability to ever-broaden her audience adding new conversation partners as she does so, she is poised to grow in her appeal to non-Indians

¹² This statement about Gurumaa having attained enlightenment in Vrindavan comes from multiple early (internal) sources: material published in an early version of the gurumaa.com website as well as in author bios from books published by Gurumaa Vani. Gurumaa also spoke of her enlightenment experience to scholar Marie-Thérèse Charpentier as having happened in Vrindavan (Charpentier 2010: 161). In a recently released English book, not using the word “enlightenment,” Gurumaa writes (speaks, rather; it is a book of transcribed discourses) about Vrindavan, which holds a “special place in [her] heart,” describing it thus: “All the seeds of wisdom sprouted in Vrindavan, where the fruition of the seed of knowledge occurred” (Gurumaa 2011a: 139). There is also another story and another understanding of “enlightenment” as being different than a one-time event. In an effort to clear up confusion about her *sannyās diwās* (an “anniversary day” of Gurumaa’s renunciation—*sannyās*, and something totally different), which some disciples were referring to mistakenly as an “enlightenment day,” Gurumaa states that there was no particular day or time of her enlightenment (see <http://soulcurrymagazine.com/sc/sanyas-divas-enlightenment-day.html>). Despite conflicting sources and general, perhaps universal, confusion about exactly what “enlightenment” means, the story of Gurumaa’s enlightenment having happened in Vrindavan seems to be the prevailing narrative, thus I keep it here.

as well as those born of Indian heritage.

In an effort to remain religiously inclusive, US disciples and Gurumaa adopted the title “New Age Seer, Inc” for their 501c-3 non-profit organization despite the often-derogatory connotations of the term “new age” in the American context.¹³

Notwithstanding her “New Age” appeal, Gurumaa makes strong assertions against current popularized uses of yoga and meditation as mere means to sculpt bodies and reduce stress. Her teachings reclaim these practices as means to “get evolved,” “become enlightened” or “become a Buddha.”

Gurumaa’s adoption of the terms “spirituality” and “new age” and her conscious reluctance to label her teachings as “religion” may be consonant with New Age spirituality, but these also indicate something of her decidedly pluralistic and Indian orientation rather than mere corroboration with a neo-liberal capitalist “silent takeover of religion” (Carrette and King 2004). “Religion” is difficult to translate into Indian languages, as Carrette and King note, and “spirituality” is sometimes a preferable descriptor in South Asia where holy persons of enlightened status have long charted innovative spiritual terrain, openly borrowing from a variety of teachers and traditions. Pioneering (even heterodox) spiritual movements have sometimes been reactions to hierarchical oppression facilitated by “traditional” religion. Innovative spiritualities (even New Age spiritualities embracing aspects of consumer culture) such as those espoused by Gurumaa and some other contemporary gurus, sometimes called “New Age gurus” by the Indian press, may serve as viable alternatives to “regressive

¹³ Though I certainly would not say inter-religious marriage is a trend, it also is not insignificant that the woman directing New Age Seer’s Inc. in the USA comes from a south Indian Brahmin family and is married to a Muslim man. Nonetheless, she is one of a number of disciples of Gurumaa whose personal stake in subscribing to a boundary-less spirituality might seem rather obvious.

fundamentalisms,” especially when these spiritualities seek to redress societal ills perpetuated or condoned by religious “tradition.”¹⁴

Context and themes of the study

I approach my study of the “21st century mystic,” Anandmurti Gurumaa (quoted from gurumaa.com), within several relevant religio-historical contexts. South Asia has been host to a rich and long tradition of syncretistic religious and spiritual innovations by charismatic holy persons including *bhaktas*, Sufis, *sants*, Sikh gurus and Christian “*swamis*” and “*faqirs*” (Cox 2002; Gold 1987a; Oberoi 1994; Sikand 2003). The colonial encounter with “modern Hinduism” engendered voluntary religious organizations, massive media expansion, and a universal language of religion that appealed to urban elites (Jones 1976, 1989; Sharma 1988; van der Veer 2001), and lent itself to a new prominence of 20th century gurus who could relate issues of modern life in the world to their audience of the rising middle class through new media (Aravamudan 2006; Babb 1986; Babb and Wadley 1995; Beckerlegge 2000a, 2001a, 2001b). Male Anglophone Indian gurus have been traveling to the West and amassing disciples for over 100 years and more recently female gurus have followed suit (Charpentier 2010; Pechilis 2004).

This dissertation provides an in-depth study of Gurumaa and her rapidly developing, disciple-driven transnational religious movement, examined within the comparative context of globetrotting Indian gurus and from within two primary thematic frameworks of religion and globalization as well as gender and feminist studies. Gurumaa is a 45 year old religious teacher with a sizable following in India and

¹⁴ Here, I borrow language used by Donald Rothberg who argues that innovative forms of Socially Engaged Buddhism along with other socially engaged spiritualities provide alternatives to “increasingly attractive and potentially dangerous forms of regressive fundamentalisms” (Rothberg 1998: 282).

a burgeoning body of disciples, mainly of South Asian descent, living in North America and the United Kingdom, new followings in Australia and Singapore, and recent interest from Western seekers.¹⁵

Observing Gurumaa and her organization at a stage in which she is still relatively young and is becoming an increasingly high-profile public figure, opens opportunities through which to understand how religious movements centering upon pivotal charismatic leaders grow in the current era of unprecedented global interconnectivity, and how such movements gain transnational followings. With its appeal to a global, English speaking cosmopolitan, Gurumaa's spiritual movement is poised to grow with Indian and non-Indian disciples alike. From this standpoint my examination of Anandmurti Gurumaa will be relevant to readers interested in religion and globalization.

By virtue of the fact that Gurumaa is a prominent female religious figure who teaches "spirituality" in Hindi and English, two of the world's five most spoken languages, Gurumaa represents a powerful new voice as well as model for female religious leadership. Moreover, she has a large number of female disciples who play important roles in her organization; she speaks out strongly and often on female

¹⁵ I realize that "Western" is a problematic expression, yet it seems unavoidable due to its prevalent use in modern gurus' language, and therefore I utilize it, as do a number of the scholarly sources I cite.

Any sort of number of Indian or global followers is difficult to give. At a large free public *Amrit Varsha* program in north India, it seems that Gurumaa draws between 20,000-50,000 people, while out of region, she might gather 2,000-25,000 listeners. (The number quoted to me in Hudson Valley by Indian American disciples seems somewhat exaggerated by my estimations from attending such programs, though I am not skilled at counting large numbers, and I never went to a large public program in Delhi, where I imagine her crowd could well be larger). None of these numbers really provide much information regarding her devoted following, however.

In 2008 and 2009, I met spiritual seekers of non-Indian heritage from Scandinavia and Eastern Europe in Gurumaa Ashram. One of these seekers later brought a group of Norwegian spiritual tourists to Gurumaa Ashram. In summer 2009, Gurumaa included Norway, Sweden and Denmark in her travels. In short, not many Westerner seekers as yet have made their way to Gurumaa Ashram, but the number of European and American seekers visiting the ashram seems to be slowly growing.

empowerment, and twelve years ago, she instigated a charity project, “Shakti,” a non-governmental organization (NGO) education program to “empower the girl child.” Gurumaa straight-forwardly points to herself as a model of female empowerment and as material evidence that women can and do attain the greatest spiritual heights despite what many “traditional” scriptures may indicate (Gurumaa 2008). Thus her leadership offers an ideal context in which to observe topics important for readers interested in religion and gender, especially in the transformations of religious virtuosity (to include women) and resultant gendered re-interpretations of religion and spirituality in the new global religious milieu.

This study looks specifically at examples of tradition and innovation within a contemporary spiritual movement with an eye to these larger above-mentioned themes related to the study of religion and globalization, and gender and religion. I examine how Gurumaa’s innovative spirituality, even when not bound by any one religion or tradition, comes from within a particular context, specifically, but not limited to that of the syncretistic north Indian *sant* tradition. More generally, this study examines *guru-bhakti* in the 21st century. So while it makes sense to look at Gurumaa as a solitary figure within the pantheon of female religious and spiritual leaders in our world today or among the growing number of prominent contemporary female Indian gurus, or even as a “revolutionary mystic” (as she calls herself, and perhaps prefers to be understood), I find it particularly helpful to see Gurumaa within the larger tradition of bhakti poet-saints (*sants*) of India whose songs she sings and whose stories she frequently tells.¹⁶

¹⁶ Interestingly, at the site of my first meeting with Gurumaa in Hudson Valley, NY, a few of Gurumaa’s female devotees encouraged me to watch contemporary evangelical preacher Joyce Meyers as part of my study. However, I do not compare the two female religious leaders in this dissertation. In terms of Gurumaa’s “televangelizing” as well as her independence, the comparison might be a fruitful one, though in a study about devotion to the teacher (*guru-bhakti*) I think the comparison would be less productive.

Given Gurumaa’s own affinity with the bhakti tradition and the way that a great many of her disciples relate to her as their Beloved, or Divine Teacher (*gurudev*), guru-devotion became immediately compelling to me in the research field. Thus, Anandmurti Gurumaa, an innovative female guru we might venture to call “New Age,” understood through the context of her larger circle of devotees, demonstrates a vivid contemporary example of *guru-bhakti*, a “traditional” path to ultimate liberation (*moksha*) with a long history in the Indian subcontinent.

As expected in any ethnographic setting, other themes emerged and shaped the study. Right away, I observed the already-mentioned tension between tradition and innovation. But my direct encounters with Gurumaa forced me to address other tensions too. One of them quite relevant to this study, readers will find woven throughout the work: the tension between knowledge and experience on the spiritual path. This tension sometimes played out in Gurumaa’s public interactions with me, the “scholar” in the field of “seekers.” I will write more about this later in this introduction. Upon reflecting on my field experiences and particularly my conversations with Gurumaa and other interlocutors, two persistent motifs materialized for me, one, the idea of divine attraction (*divya ākārśan*) in bhakti as being similar to a “call and response,” and another motif, the transmission of religious knowledge, practice and experience as emerging through “conversation.” I will have more to say about these tensions and motifs, what some might call sub-themes, at a later point in this chapter.

Gurumaa provides an abundant “all-in-one” package not only for her devotees, but also as a fruitful object of study. Gurumaa and her growing organization provide ample avenues of theoretical inquiry that suit my intellectual and scholarly

“fascinations,” which Gurumaa renamed for me during our second meeting, as mere “itchings of the mind.”¹⁷ Beyond this dissertation’s contribution to studies specializing in South Asia, it addresses broader theoretical issues of interest in religious studies, anthropology and gender studies through the lens of a particular and noteworthy case of a new (yet old) type of emerging global religiosity. With methodological grounding in the history of religions and anthropology, I aim to bring my work into interdisciplinary conversations addressing the changing nature of women’s increasingly visible leadership of and participation in contemporary transnational religious movements. This guru is female, she is “New Age,” is not “bound” by tradition and she even speaks against traditions when she deems it necessary. Yet, she gives universally applicable teachings from within a religiously Indian setting—a setting in which the guru-disciple relationship has for millennia held a central place. In more general terms, this study observes and reflects on what it means for a contemporary religious leader to remain both beholden to the setting from which she comes and also to contribute something new, more expansive, and perhaps more globally relevant to conversations regarding religious knowledge, practice and experience.

Layers of “conversation” and transmission

As noted earlier, a secondary theme of this study is the role of conversation in the guru-disciple relationship, taking into account the relevance of conversation in Indian scriptural traditions. Here, I briefly present the motif of “conversation” used

¹⁷ My choice of the word “fascination” alludes to my own acknowledgment that researchers are drawn to certain topics and objects of study that fascinate them, sometimes for personal reasons (Gold 2003). This conversation occurred in a private *darshan* session for a small audience prior to a large public discourse on 11 May 2007, in Secaucus, New Jersey.

throughout this study.

In the realm of communication and the various means through which messages may travel from A to B, or from B to A, I use the term “conversation” in the context of the guru-disciple relationship in its broadest possible sense to include many forms in addition to the classical question and answer upon which many Hindu textual traditions are formed. This study begins with the question, “What does innovation do to the conversation?” and through the empirical examples offered, I hope to suggest some answers.

Much of the communication that happens in the guru-disciple relationship, even the call and response or initial attraction, falls into the rather broad category of what I am calling conversation. Sometimes this conversation is direct and embodied, existing audibly between people. Sometimes it takes place in the heart. Sometimes it takes place through words, through the process of articulation and expression, as Truth or revelation takes on a particular form as “sound,” “voice,” or “word” (*vāc*; *shabd* or Punjabi, *shabad*) of a sage or teacher. And sometimes it takes place on the level of refinement, when a disciple reviews, examines and studies himself in light of the guru’s word or experience with the guru.

In our first meeting in Hudson Valley, NY, Gurumaa explained to me, “I am like an old time farmer; I sow the seed.” Here she uses a metaphor common to the bhakti tradition and one with particular resonance among the Hindi speaking *sants*, the image of the seed and the field, in which the word of a true guru (*satguru*) is understood to be a seed planted in the heart of the disciple (Gold 1987b; Schomer 1987). From that planted seed, an awakening can occur allowing insight and illumination to grow right

from the disciple's own inner being. This metaphor, common also to the Sikh tradition in which Gurumaa was raised, finds ample expression in songs of the early gurus (*gurbānī*) in the *Adi Granth*, the holy book of the Sikhs.¹⁸ In both the *sant*'s and Sikh gurus' *bānī*, a shared theme exists: the seed planted in the heart of the disciple comes to grow and bear fruit only after it is watered with the word (*shabad* ie. Word) and loving presence of the true teacher, then nourished with the disciple's devotion.

Of course, depending on the disciple's own needs, the fecundity of the soil, the timing of the planting, and other factors, the "old time farmer" may have little or much tending to do in order to see a yield of fruit. Sahajo Bai, an 18th century poet of the Hindi *sant* tradition, known in Gurumaa Ashram for her prominently placed statue on the grounds and for her songs sung by Gurumaa, wrote, "The disciple, is a seedling, nourished through the nectar of devotion and the flood of the guru's grace. / Sahajo, this bush grew to become a fine tree and bore fruit!"¹⁹ The guru has often been thought to possess certain power (*shakti*) enabling him or her to transmit such divine grace but in today's global age of air travel and electronic community, a guru's circle grows ever larger as do disciples' understandings of the transmission of the guru's powerful word and presence. Gurus have been known to travel physical and astral space. Now they travel cyber space too and continue planting seeds along the way.

¹⁸ The Sikh tradition is in many ways closely aligned with the *sant* tradition, or can be understood in its early years at least to have been a Punjabi language "path" (*panth*) within the larger amorphous *sant* tradition. Understandings of the word "*shabad*" (meaning word, sound or voice) of the early Sikh gurus, falls in line with similar understandings of the word in Hindi (*shabd*) expressed in the songs of Hindi singing *sants*. It is notable that *bānī*, typically glossed as "verse," also means "sound" or "voice."

¹⁹ Lyrics in transliterated Hindi: *Sikh paudā naudhā amī, guru kṛpā kī bārḥ / sahajo taruvar phail bārḥ, suphal phale yeh jhār*. This translation is mine, though I acknowledge with gratitude Aveling and Joshi's, as well as the Hindi lyrics they provide (Sahajo Bai 2001: 46). I generally find their translations perfectly adequate and more poetic than mine. Here, I find it useful to provide mine. Aveling and Joshi translated the Hindi word *kṛpā* (*kṛpā*) as "kindness," however, *kṛpā* is translated most commonly – and here – as "grace." I found the notion of *guru-kṛpā* quite prevalent among Gurumaa's disciples, for whom *kṛpā* means grace, not merely kindness. Here, I feel, the Christian-centric word match makes good sense.

In our network age of communication, temporal considerations of time, space, and context are always shifting. But hasn't this always been the case at some level? For instance, the student who asked the teacher a question which ended up as an *Upanishad*, perhaps did not think of the fact that he was drawing a teaching from the master that might remain relevant to other seekers over the course of 2,500 years, or that this answer would carry various shades of meaning for its multiple audiences in their own contexts. And if that seeker did have some idea, could he have imagined those questions having relevance to all of the audiences today interested in those teachings? What about American yoga practitioners, predominantly women (*hatha yoginis*) who engage in studies of yoga philosophy? Could 18th century Sahajo Bai have imagined her songs would be sung and her story told to someone like me? Even within one particular age, layers upon layers of "conversation" between teacher and student exist. Words uttered by the guru to the student and planted in the heart may mean one thing at one moment, and then take on new and deeper meaning as the disciple progresses along the spiritual path. What might the same statement mean to another student in another context? According to the great early 20th century poet Rabindranath Tagore, teachings such as the *Upanishads* and the teachings of the Buddha *should* be understood and re-understood in various contexts:

The meaning of the living words that come out of the experiences of great hearts can never be exhausted by any one system of logical interpretation. They have to be endlessly explained by the commentaries of individual lives, and they gain an added mystery in each new revelation (Tagore 1972/1913: viii).

Tagore explains that even within what we might call "commentary" on the Word of another sage, there is possibility for "added mystery" in each "new revelation" by the

living sage. What teachings will have staying power over the course of thousands of years? And what Word – seed – will grow and bear fruit?

Today's gurus may have specific networks of conversation partners/ students. These networks may be thought of as audiences, or perhaps even markets, but each audience or network has overlapping networks. Perhaps the audience, much like Gurumaa's primary one, is a niche market of urban dwelling middle class New Age seekers in India. Yet there will undoubtedly be boundary-less network overlap between that particular one and other networks such as those of hatha yoga enthusiasts, healthy living audiences, meditators, or even academics who study gurus. Therefore, the teacher may not always know within whose heart she or he plants a seed. In her ashram, Gurumaa once told me that when she teaches and when she sings, she does not know who in that audience will be affected or who will respond in what way by crying or dancing or shouting or becoming completely silent. On another occasion, she told me that even in her very large public programs (of up to 50,000 people), her hope is that some single person out there hears and understands what she is saying, that someone out there will begin to evolve and transform his life because of what she shares. Similarly, several years prior to our conversation, Gurumaa stated to her listening audience the following words (later transcribed and printed in a published book) regarding the reason she acquiesced to disciples' appeals to record her talks:

I used to say that if you need to record then do so in your heart, not on some dead machine. But then time changed and I accepted the power of electronic media that it can reach a far wider audience. I allowed the recordings and left the responsibilities of sincere listening on people. Today in different cities and even different countries my discourses are being aired. You switch on your T.V. and there I am trying to hit the jackpot by making my way in your heart so as to sow the seeds of love, divinity and spiritual hunger. (Gurumaa c.2000: 9-10)

Not long after my initial arrival in the ashram, my “conversations” with Gurumaa (often my question and her spontaneous hour-long answer) became occasion for recording and transcribing and were eventually put into digital document form for future use in another format to be determined. The service (*sevā*) assignment given to me in the ashram was “English typing,” to transcribe into digital document Gurumaa’s spontaneous and informal discourses, words spoken to me and to others in the ashram in English.²⁰ Once I wrote (jokingly) in a letter to a mentor that I might one day see a book of Gurumaa’s answers to Angela’s questions in the ashram bookstore. But I realized too that this was actually a serious possibility, if not in a book, then perhaps I might sometime see Gurumaa’s words of response to me published on her website or in her glossy New Age magazine, *Soul Curry*.²¹ Might those words she spoke to me in a particular context one day find relevance in some other person’s life in quite a different context? Answering that question affirmatively is giving Gurumaa quite a lot of clout, but readers should know that Gurumaa’s students very much see her as a “Self-realized” master (one who has realized and abides in the Divine Self) whose words come from a place of ultimate Truth, and therefore, in their eyes, she does have that clout.

I have to admit that when Gurumaa looked at me in gatherings and asked, “What do you want to know today, Angela?” I felt some real pressure to have a good

²⁰ In this study I identify these in citations as “Darshan discourse” with date and location. These spontaneous discourses typically occurred during “darshan sessions” in the ashram and were recorded by ashram staff (on occasion by me). Therefore, “Darshan discourse” indicates speech to a small, fairly intimate gathering rather than a public talk that would be recorded and distributed broadly. It is a label used for this study and to my knowledge not used by Gurumaa Ashram.

²¹ *Soul Curry* was exactly that, a glossy New Age magazine. This aptly titled periodical on New Age spirituality that crosses traditional religious borders might contain anything from instruction on yogic practices to biographies of sages and saints from various religiosities, to interviews with spiritual leaders to feature articles by and about Gurumaa. The magazine has addressed the topics of marriage, sex, physical and mental health and well being among others. *Soul Curry* was rather short-lived; print issues run from 2006-2009 (though the website still appears to be active).

question ready, a question whose answer would have meaning not only to me but also to the rest of her listening audience sitting near. Once my ashram English typing assignment began, a larger, unknown audience became more tangible to me as well. Questions to this woman should be worthwhile, I thought, not “What year did you graduate from college?”²² I was aware also of not wanting to look like a fool to her. Just prior to fieldwork, I had seen a video of Gurumaa online speaking about how one should come to a spiritual master with questions only of the highest relevance, citing some of the foolish requests and questions she sometimes hears; one should ask only for knowledge and for the lighting of the lamp of wisdom within them.²³ Furthermore, I tried not to waste her time with questions I could conceivably get answers to elsewhere. So I typically sacrificed efforts to gather biographical detail. And when I did now and then slip into asking a more foolish question, she would let me know. A question to Gurumaa would need to be compelling enough for her to answer before other, more urgent, questions of spiritual seekers awaiting her attention (written on slips of paper and piled up next to her seat prior to her arrival in the hall or other venue in which she sat). During my period of research, even when Gurumaa spoke to me directly in small gatherings, she spoke in such a way that her words would have wide appeal, understanding and application to others in attendance and beyond. Sometimes we may be able to gauge just whom our audience is when we participate in

²² The common understanding is that Gurumaa obtained her B.A. degree from Government College in Amritsar. I did not spend time confirming this. I have heard Gurumaa say that she left college for “more pressing matters” and I discuss this further in Chapter 5. I presume, along with disciples, that Gurumaa finished the degree when she returned to Amritsar after her sojourn throughout north India. Perhaps most importantly she talks about her education experience in the following way. She is grateful for her education and also grateful to her mother for having made her take a secular education when all she wanted was to be immersed in scriptural studies and her *sādhana*. She stresses the importance of education to her listeners; she especially stresses the importance of education for female children.

²³ <http://www.gurumaa.com/videos/pray-for-enlightenment.html> . Accessed 20 January 2012.

conversation, when we speak publicly, when we write academic papers, when we respond to someone's questions, but there is always the unknown audience, especially in our digital, electronic age, and that audience too becomes part of the conversation.

That questions and answers and conversations and teachings between student and teacher take form in many ways has long been part of the Indian tradition. This thesis takes into account a number of traditional and contemporary conversations within and beyond the Indian religious context, some of which even have scriptural archetypes: between master and disciple, between guru and scholar, between parent and child, between wife and husband, between the mystic and her Lord, between the Lord and his consort, between the lover and the Beloved, between and amongst scholars, between and amongst disciples, between and amongst seekers, between and amongst friends, between scholar and *bhakta*, and between New Age gurus and New Age spiritual seekers.

As I write, I continually hear the questions asked of me by friends over dinner in Ithaca, New York as well as questions and responses shared between colleagues and mentors in my academic "world" (*loka*). At the same time I hear the questions and remember the confidences shared by seekers, friends and fellow travelers (*hamsafar*) I encountered during the course of my fieldwork in India and also in America. I remember my many questions and Gurumaa's answers. And I remember Gurumaa's verbal responses to emails and other writings I shared with her in small gatherings in the ashram. While I participate in academic conversations regarding Indian gurus and charismatic religious leaders and women's religious leadership, I hope to also offer something to conversation partners in contexts beyond the academic *loka*. The

somewhat informal style employed in my writing reflects an attempt to make this work accessible to many, to broaden my own audience, so to speak.

This thesis examines the guru-disciple relationship in the spirit of “conversations” and through the lens of a particular spiritual movement growing around a “21st century mystic,” a bold, charismatic and prolific woman who calls forth with her singing voice, speaks her mind—if sometimes quite sharply—is at once very modern, perhaps even cosmopolitan, and is very much grounded in Indian spiritual heritage. In an examination of stories coming from the master as well as from within, beyond and near the “master’s circle,” which is the “concrete revelation of the ‘power’ of the master” (Wach 1925/1988), I look at the master-disciple relationship in our contemporary global context.

In the larger context of Indian religious traditions, the “Self-realized” guru, by virtue of her communion with the Divine Self, has access to differing levels of “conversation.” As mentioned above, the guru can participate in conversation physically as well as in other more mysterious ways not bound to the guru’s physical or surface form. Contemporary media add more layers to the communication possible between gurus and disciples. The modern, reformist guru of the 19th century, the globetrotting 20th century guru and the tech-savvy 21st century New Age guru are all analogous in their embrace of the latest technological media available to them. As the modern *neo-Vedantins* made use of print media through pamphleteering and various genres of public and private writing, 20th century gurus embraced video and sound recordings, and 21st century New Age Indian gurus add to these methods of transmission: blogging, tweeting, emailing, text-messaging, maintenance of multi-

media websites, as well as Podcasts and YouTube broadcasting. The guru's *voice* penetrates a larger "public" than ever before.²⁴ The "masses" with whom the Indian sage converses through mass communications media is an ever-changing, ever-new audience.

Scholars have pointed to the fact that the "inclusive spirit" in songs of medieval *sants* of Maharashtra and in Hindi speaking north India established links between these cultures. The *Adi-Granth* and its inclusion of songs not only from the early Sikh gurus (*gurbānī*) but also from non-Sikh "devotees" or "lovers" (*bhagat bānī*) is evidence of cross-linguistic and cross-religious links.²⁵ What sort of links might global New Age gurus be making between various cultures, between religious traditions and between various networks?

Add to this the more mysterious aspects of transmission, notions in which knowledge becomes available to the disciple through various forms of communion with the guru in his (or now, her) physical, subtle and astral forms. This understanding regarding the guru-disciple relationship, Tantric in origin yet prevalent also in medieval *sants'* songs, has popular currency among many of today's New Age gurus. In the "tradition" of *guru-bhakti*, methods through which transmission is both emitted and received are dynamic. Keeping this in mind, add the increasing means of communication through new recording technologies available in our contemporary era and the number of languages besides English gaining momentum in electronic media

²⁴ I italicize "voice" here to emphasize the importance of this notion in the Indic context as it is multiply expressed in Indian languages (*vāc, shabd, bānī*).

²⁵ I refer here to the verses (*bānī*) from devotees (*bhagats*) such as the *sants* Namdev and Kabir, as well as Sufi, Shaik Farid. For a comprehensive list of the 15 non-Sikh *bhagats* see (Singh 2003: 9). In Singh's study of Sikh religious identity as it can be understood from the perspective of non-Sikh inclusion in the canon, he contends that sometimes *bhagats'* verses were included for their identity with the teachings of the early gurus and sometimes were included for their difference, though these differences are often subtle.

forms. Audience and market as well as methods of outreach are in continual flux. How do innovative media technologies change the conversation? Our notions of transmission continue to evolve, as do our notions of proximity to the guru.

Though it is obviously beyond this study by virtue of the newness of the phenomenon of New Age gurus, we are yet to explore the posthumous electronic footprint and legacy of the mystic masters of our current age who draw from larger than ever before (even if in sometimes watered down) bodies of spiritual knowledge and make their own transmissions available in ever-new ways. What will remain to be seen is what this era of social networking mystic teachers and gurus will leave behind. It makes sense to ponder the very idea of legacy or lineage as it moves beyond localized physical proximity.²⁶ Sages and saints who have “left their bodies” (common Indian-English spiritual parlance for “died”) can be venerated in the material sacred spaces where they immersed in their own practices – their caves, their cells, their ashrams, their temples – and they can be remembered through various recorded materials, both public and private. After the deaths of this age’s teachers, might researchers and seekers in the future receive another layer of transmission—from media left behind? What spoken, tweeted, blogged word today might be a seed that grows in another

²⁶ Related to the idea of new forms of lineage, it should be noted that sometimes gurus claim lineages when the lineages do not claim them. Initiations too can happen in open-ended ways, even without the innovations of modern technology. See Vasudha Narayanan’s short study of a guru from Brooklyn, Ma Jaya, who was trained and guided posthumously through visionary experiences by Swami Nityananda decades after his death in order to ready her to meet her true guru, Neem Karoli Baba, who appeared to her the year after his death (Narayanan 2004). It bears repeating here that “conversation” as I am using it would include the more mysterious forms of transmission which occur between student and teacher, similarly to Ma Jaya’s, in communication taking place in dreams, visions, etc. Ma Jaya’s visionary tutorials included meetings with Christ as well. Posthumous succession is not unique to the “Hindu” tradition. The Christian tradition from its origins relies on a key posthumous initiation; the authoritative voice in the early Christian Church, Paul (earlier known as Saul), encountered Jesus not in the flesh, but rather, in a visionary experience on the road to Damascus after Jesus’ death. These examples of posthumous succession are different from the new forms of modes of communication and transmission I allude to in the text, innovations which may lead to even more open-ended legacies and lineages.

context? And what will be the surprises?²⁷ Digital libraries include that which does not get shared in the course of a lifetime for reasons of privacy, confidence, or simply a lack of time to share every outpouring that comes from a creative, engaged mind. What sorts of transmissions occur through all of today's electronic media? These questions are relevant to gurus and scholars alike (anywhere) whose lives and legacies could potentially engage the dynamic flux of meanings in religious knowledge, practice and experience.

Take this and combine it with the numerous ways that listeners, students, readers, disciples, scholars, journalists and other respondents engage with these already innumerable means of transmissions. Receivers of knowledge then express, articulate and re-articulate through their own journaling, writing, blogging, story telling and various other creative emergences such as music, hatha yoga, dance and teaching. Between, among and beneath these infinite possibilities for transmissions, emissions and responses, I consider the instances of tradition and innovation and evolving patterns in the guru-disciple relationship in our contemporary religious scene. And for this, sometimes, I broaden the conversation out of Gurumaa's extended circle (or to it's farthest edges; there is no particular boundary) into overlapping networks.

Attraction: call and response

On the first day I began ethnographic research for this study in Hudson Valley, New York, I engaged devotees in conversation about their guru. I had been keen to find out what Gurumaa does that attracts people to her. I presumed that she drew people

²⁷ Besides their words, religious teachers have left other surprises after their deaths as well; just consider Satya Sai Baba (already bathed in scandal during his lifetime) with his rooms full of cash.

somehow by the content in her discourses or with her singing voice. I wondered what marketing strategies her team of techie-disciples employed in order to attract seekers via various media forms.²⁸ I wondered if the cause of empowering Indian girl children through education brought to her a certain type of devotee interested in this particular human rights issue. What I had not given any real thought to on that day was the power of divine attraction (*divya akāśān*) itself in the world of spiritual seeking. I had yet to discover the array of ideas behind notions of attraction that Gurumaa's disciples would have. I knew that stories of disciples finding their gurus and being found by them in the age of yore were abundant and rich and replete with miraculous occurrences, but I was only yet to observe and discover such mystical attractions in the contemporary urban context. I had not considered the fact that such mystery (*rahasya*) would remain a central part of the conversation about the guru-disciple relationship as it occurs in the 21st century.

After listening to many stories about devotees' experiences of their attraction to Gurumaa and of their own personal transformations attributed to the setting of the guru-disciple relationship, I was forced to look at attraction from yet another angle. That does not mean that this dissertation does not also take seriously the more material, physical modes and ways that spiritual seekers are attracted to this teacher. Indeed, these material aspects still in many ways form the very structure of this study, but I attempt also to take seriously the mystery, which *to the disciple* remains even today

²⁸ From Maya Warriar's fine ethnographic work, and my own previous exploration of BAPS Swaminarayan Hinduism, I already had a good idea of the ways that *sevā* was distributed according to people's talents and professionally honed skills. I quickly learned that Gurumaa too had a skilled "team" of techies whose *sevā* it was to re-present and redistribute her Word. For more regarding *guru-sevā* in modern contexts, see the work of Gwilym Beckerlegge for *sevā* in Swami Vivekananda's Ramakrishna Mission (2000a; 2000b) and Maya Warriar for *sevā* in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission and Trust (2003; 2005).

the most powerful element in the attraction to the guru. In the context of that mystery, one's attraction to a guru can be understood as a call or as a response to a call. Within the worldview of Indian guru-devotion, the guru is one who has tapped into a divine Source, and therefore Gurumaa's mellifluous singing voice, her striking physical appearance, or even her harsh words of criticism that somehow hit home, all can be understood as powerful, mystical and otherworldly calls of the Divine Beloved to the devotee or lover.

Though the concept of "call and response" will likely bring to mind Christian connotations for some readers, the idea arose from two prevalent Indian call and response scenarios: one is the call of Krishna's flute to the cowherd women (*gopīs*) in the forest along the Yamuna river in Vrindavan and the *gopīs'* responses; the other is the call and response of devotional singing (*kīrtan*), in which the lead singer calls through song and the listening assembly responds by singing the words back. Additionally, a "realized-guru's" own vibrations are thought to be so strong that they will call forth receptive seekers who then respond by encountering that guru firsthand. In the context of fieldwork, disciples of Gurumaa often asked me, how I had been "called" (*bulāya*) to the ashram, which was also referred to as a Buddhafield. I had thus been attracted in more ways than one to a field of multiple meanings (I will return to this idea shortly).

Organization of this study

The following two chapters offer more introductions to traditions of guru devotion, to contemporary Indian gurus and gurus more generally. In Chapter 2, I begin with a brief discussion of the term “guru” and a textual-historical overview demonstrating the continuity and significance of the guru-disciple relationship in Indian religious traditions. This chapter further introduces my setting in the “field” and presents key bhakti concepts appearing throughout the study, what we might think of as classical elements to the guru-disciple relationship, through ethnographic renderings. Chapter 3 examines a category utilized by popular Indian press, “New Age guru,” in order to begin our conversation on continuity and change more broadly, while the remaining chapters focus on tradition and innovation within Gurumaa’s organization. In Chapter 3, I discuss literature on medieval era and modern gurus suggesting that gurus have long been innovators, and I propose that well before the rise of those we might call New Age gurus, like Gurumaa, there was precedent for innovation and breaking with “tradition” within Indian religious traditions. Thus, innovation for Indian gurus is – in a sense – following tradition.

The second half of the study turns its focus to specific areas in which Gurumaa’s innovations most obviously stand out. These have already been mentioned or alluded to in this introduction: her religious pluralism, her gender activism, and her utilization of new communications media. In examining the type of pluralism Gurumaa espouses in her teachings and in her life, Chapter 4 looks at the guru’s body itself as a place of pluralism in order to show how Gurumaa expands beyond the boundaries of “religion” yet remains grounded in Indic spirituality. This chapter explores the notion of the

guru's body, form, or embodiment (*rūpa*), as a representation of unbounded freedom. In Chapter 5, "Shakti's New Voice," I portray the way in which Gurumaa explicitly offers herself as a gendered model of freedom through her words: in verse, in discourse and in prose. But she also offers herself through her own lived experience. Stories from the lives of some of Gurumaa's female followers demonstrate that at least some women among her avid listeners and devotees do see her as a model for their own lives. Chapter 6 samples Gurumaa's multi-media offerings to examine the ways in which she broadens her scope of conversation partners while at the same time creates community (*satsang*) through the use of new media and innovative technologies. Looking at "audience" as a market or at a market as audience, today's gurus, like many religious or spiritual teachers (more broadly), engage in recruitment and commerce through the Internet. This chapter looks at and beyond these two important and perhaps most obvious uses to examine ways in which Gurumaa, with the help of her "tech team," uses innovative new media for what we might consider to be traditional tasks of spiritual masters, to disseminate teachings, to create community and offer guidance to that community, in other words, to "perform the same magic" (gurumaa.com) that spiritual masters have always performed. This chapter draws inspiration from recent scholarly work by Gwilym Beckerlegge on "computer-mediated religion" and Smriti Srinivas, particularly in her discussion of Satya Sai Baba's "electronic presence."²⁹

In conclusion to this dissertation, I review notions of conversation discussed and return to the tensions in these conversations, between tradition and innovation as well

²⁹ Older, yet seminal scholarship by William A. Graham has been helpful in thinking about the oral-aural aspects of what I am calling the "digital Word" of contemporary sages, and indeed, Lawrence A. Babb and Susan S. Wadley's important edited volume on media and religion in South Asia has helped to shape this chapter as well (Babb and Wadley 1995; Beckerlegge 2001a; Graham 1987; Srinivas 2008).

as between *jñāna* and bhakti, knowledge and devotion, to look at how they overlap and where they find integration. And I ask questions for future study regarding conversational forms and flexible boundaries.

In what follows here, I offer some of the particularities of my ethnographic methods in the field—in this case the field being not only Gurumaa Ashram, the “Buddhafield,” but also as existing beyond the gates of the ashram – the Buddhafield proper – to include the worlds of disciples in their own communities. I examine my role of studying an ashram while also living in it, and then what it was like to go out from there, to visit and receive hospitality and ethnographic riches from informants outside the Buddhafield yet within the larger circle of Gurumaa-lovers to conduct interviews.

A sant and a scholar

Whenever I try to articulate the significance of this study for the purpose of academic discourse, I am reminded of a story from one of my earliest fieldwork moments. In Secaucus, NJ in 2007, I was given audience with Gurumaa and a small number of her Indian-American devotees. In this second-ever, brief and semi-private meeting with her, I held in my lap the first of many little black fieldwork journals, which was at this point filled with questions rather than my notes. In this small room where Gurumaa met with invited individuals prior to her public discourse, I watched the outpourings of devotion that seekers expressed to her. Some came with tears pouring down their faces to bow at her feet. Others offered flowers and fruit, or envelopes of cash, traditional gifts for a guru. Some placed at her feet wrapped packages or items in Gap™ bags. Some simply exchanged smiles and laughter. Some were meeting Gurumaa for the first time

and seemed nervous. Gurumaa remembered my name, greeted me, and looking directly at me asked, “What do you want to know?” in a friendly if penetrating way that became characteristic in public and private settings over the course of my fieldwork. Not wanting to dampen anyone’s devotional mood, I was suddenly tongue tied and felt my questions were inappropriate for the particular setting, so I fumbled an answer, stating that I had a number of questions but that they were perhaps “not so significant” after all. I would feel this way more times in the course of my early fieldwork, and I therefore began new lists of “ready questions” that would be both suitable for my own research purposes and for devotees’ desires to hear teachings, and would write these questions down from the back page towards the front in my fieldwork journals in the likely event I would be put on the spot. It was in this room at this moment that Gurumaa replied, calling my questions mere “itchings of the mind,” and she further advised me, pointedly, “What is in the heart” carries “far more significance.”

In Gurumaa’s response she brought to my awareness a creative tension that exists meaningfully on both the spiritual path and in the academic study of religion, the tension between knowledge and experience. This tension is often expressed in the medieval north Indian world of bhakti—a *loka* influential in Gurumaa’s own spiritual foundation—as a tension between “knowledge” associated with books, ritual and regimen (sometimes represented by the scholar or the priest) and intuitive wisdom arising out of the “experience” of devotional love, which takes form as knowledge or realization (sometimes represented by the yogi, the wandering *sādhu*, or the *realized-guru* or sage). Over the course of three subsequent extended fieldwork stints in Gurumaa Ashram in 2008 and 2009, I recognized and experienced how this creative

tension is very much alive for a fieldworker who participates, observes, moves through and dwells in the ethnographic setting of a religious or spiritual community. Therefore, while tending to the above-mentioned primary themes, this study points to another creative tension in addition to the tension between tradition and innovation. It also looks at tension between knowledge and experience in the corresponding paths of knowledge (*jñāna yoga*) and devotion (*bhakti yoga*) and begins to observe how this plays out between the overlaying forms of academic and spiritual conversation.

On one level, I was a scholar studying and writing about Anandmurti Gurumaa, and surely not much different in her eyes than a journalist asking for an interview or anyone else who comes to her for any reason. On another level, over the course of time, I found myself in the role of yet another scholar in yet another age coming to yet another sage looking for answers to questions that “book learning” did not satisfy. Sometimes my role brought benefits, access and VIP seating. Sometimes it had me play the role of the fool—the scholar who does not yet get it, who has filled her life with books but has not found the Truth. I may have thought I was coming to the “field” for research, but from the perspective of the guru, I was coming just like anyone else, because I was a seeker—whether I was self-conscious of that or not. This is the way a guru sees anyone coming to her; in all scenarios her role in guiding others on the path of spiritual evolvment remains the same.

Methods in the Buddhafield

So that readers may gain insight into my own ways of “seeing” (*darśana*), I offer here a reflexive sketch of my methods and my time in the research field and its greater circle.³⁰ In doing so, I note some parallels between the ethnographic practice of reflexivity and the spiritual discipline of self-discrimination (*ātmavicāra*).³¹ The practice of *ātmavicāra*, literally, “a turning of the Self,” is an important aspect of a spiritual seeker’s discipline (*sādhana*), a process by which the seeker (*sādhak*) reflects on his experience with awareness and discrimination.

Gurumaa describes a related yogic stance, typically glossed as “witness awareness” (*sākṣī bhāva*), as being the very basis of meditation. Watching one’s own mind during the practice of meditation (*dhyāna*) can be carried outward into one’s larger life in order to help the seeker to determine “what is real and what is un-real.”³² This process of watching one’s own mind, honed in meditation and expanded into one’s greater life by taking the stance of the witness (*sākṣī*) as one acts in the world, helps to keep the seeker from being fooled by the mind’s projections—a danger common on the spiritual path.³³ Gurumaa often describes this process as “watching the movie of your life.” As a witness, in *sākṣī bhāva*, a seeker loses his sense of doer-ship, all the while

³⁰ Gurumaa explains that the Sanskrit word *darśana* does not have a perfect match in English translation. In her view, the word’s English gloss as “philosophy” does not properly express *darśana*’s notion of “sight,” for *darśana*, literally, means “seeing” or a way of seeing, thus it is a way of understanding, while Gurumaa points out, philosophy can become “dogma.” The common Hindi word “darshan” used to denote a meeting or an encounter with deity or holy person implies an exchange of sight. Thus, we might say *darśana* is dynamic. My use of the word *darśana* here, therefore, expresses the way in which I have seen and approached this research. It also expresses the sentiment that my own engagement would be somewhat different from another’s because of the lenses through which we see.

³¹ In Daniel Gold’s “Epilogue” to his second book on the north Indian *sant* tradition, he writes: “Thus grounded in similar sources of imagination but different senses of reality, the practices of devotees and religionists are likely to present both curious parallels and interesting contrasts” (1988: 127).

³² See Gurumaa’s words in a video published on her website: <http://www.gurumaa.com/spiritual-question-answers/sakshi-bhava.html>.

³³ The Sanskrit word *sākṣ*, from which we get *sākṣī*, most commonly translated as “witness” (and spelled *sākshi* in transliterated Hindi), literally means, “having eyes.”

participating and watching himself. The ethnographic practice of participant observation, I learned, also involves a certain distancing, watching or witnessing of oneself, one's thoughts and one's actions while participating in various active and deep research, especially when living in one's field site. Reflexive ethnography, therefore, parallels *sākṣī bhāva* in this regard.

My own direct encounters with Gurumaa brought this to my attention poignantly. All the while I watched, listened to and observed her, in my comings and goings from the ashram, I was also watching her watch me. The “once over” I received each time we met again was as palpable as her ensuing verbal comments on my appearance and spiritual state.³⁴ It is one thing to receive comments on oneself from friends and interlocutors in the field, and it is quite another to receive them from one's research subject herself—especially so when she is a guru. The watching and being watched (seeing and being seen) affected my self-understanding and my research, causing me to witness myself in the field more than I otherwise would have done. While I engaged simultaneously in the practices of *sākṣī bhāva* and participant observation, I realized that discernment and discrimination of my time in the field, from observation and witnessing of myself as I participated and observed others, was important to both endeavors, the spiritual path and ethnographic practice. It was also absolutely essential to living harmoniously in a spiritual community, whether inhabiting a Buddhafield for the purpose of enlightenment or for one's research goals. My reflexive voice therefore enters the fieldwork narrative throughout the work for the dual purposes of maintaining academic and spiritual integrity on the one hand, and for illuminating

³⁴ Giving someone the “once over” is an American English expression meaning to look someone over from head to toe. In Chapter 4, I discuss Gurumaa's observance of my appearance, noting that I was becoming “more Indian all the time.”

particular aspects of 21st century *guru-bhakti* on the other.

Of the 10 months I spent in India for field research, most were lived in Gurumaa Ashram, and my travels “outside” (*bahār*) were to explore her devotional circle’s outer boundaries—to see Gurumaa offer discourse in various places and to visit devotees in cities throughout India.³⁵ Because of family responsibilities, the research in India happened over the course of 2 years and in three separate research stints. In the 6 years that I have been involved in studying Gurumaa, I also participated in several events she offered in the US. In two of the three research journeys, I went to the field with child in tow. On the first trip, our then six-year-old daughter accompanied me, and proved to be a natural research assistant as well as magnet for potential conversation partners. On the second trip, as I engaged in solo fieldwork, I was referred to by some ashramites as a “free bird.” On my third research trip, accompanied by our then four-year-old son, I was anything but free with this child near-constantly attached to my leg. The differences in my situation each time offered new perspectives as well as different experiences. I thus held more than one identity in the field. Furthermore, my coming and going (*āna-jāna*) paralleled the movements of householder disciples who frequented the ashram. Staying longer than the typically allowed 2 weeks at a time (for householders), my extended stays at times put me in the position of ashram insider, and I had the chance to know

³⁵ I visited Gurumaa Video Centers and Gurumaa Meditation Centers in: Mumbai, Jaipur, Shimla, Mohali and Jalandhar. I also spoke with disciples in locations where I attended Gurumaa’s *Amrit Varsha* or other programs: Gurdaspur, Pathankot and Ludhiana in Punjab, and in Kolkata. In addition to visiting disciples in their homes in all of these cities (besides Pathankot, where I only attended the *satsang*), I also visited homes of disciples in Delhi, Sonapat, Rishikesh and Amritsar in North India as well as Thane, Pune and Nagpur in Maharashtra. In all, I had extended conversations with at least 25 different family/kin groups in these cities and met many more devotees, engaging in shorter conversations at Gurumaa’s centers and at her events. To get a broader perspective on gurus and spiritual communities, I visited over 10 spiritual community centers in India *not* connected to Gurumaa. Some of them are mentioned in this study. I stayed overnight in two of these: Amritapuri, Mata Amritanandamayi’s ashram in Kerala; and Sadhana Kendra Ashram in Domet (near Dehradun in Uttar Pradesh) an ashram with meditation as its primary focus, that is directed by Chandra Swami Udasin, a silent, Udasi Sikh teacher who answers seekers’ questions in *darshan* sessions with pen and paper.

many who live their lives fully in the Buddhafield. I was a researcher. I was a mother. And eventually, between fieldwork stints one and two, I became aware of my own spiritual seeking after recognizing my spiritual Teacher (in someone other than Gurumaa). Returning to the field with somewhat vague instructions from my own Teacher to “see the guru everywhere,” I found myself more receptive to learning from Gurumaa and to personal transformation. On my second research stint, as I walked the thin line woven between and through my dual roles as seeker and scholar, I met (through introduction by Gurumaa’s devotees), another important teacher. I fell in love with an elderly itinerant Sikh *bābā*, a “*hāsī avadhūt*,” an odd, yet charismatic figure whose physical tics and uncontrolled outbursts of laughter purportedly sometimes get him kicked out of *gurdwaras* (though I entered and remained in several with him) and whose own small-scale mission of love and *gurbānī* immersion is carried out in villages and towns through northern Punjab, Himanchal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and Delhi.³⁶ My instantaneous love for this “God-intoxicated-father” (*Mastana Baba**) and his love for me was indeed a learning tool that helped me to understand devotees’ feelings about their own gurus.³⁷

I had devised my research project unaware that my academic “fascinations” were related in any way to a spiritual journey. A skeptic-scholar’s written review of a grant application expressed worry that I might be searching for “enlightenment” myself, bringing into my awareness the notion that I might be seeking something other than an academic degree in all of these years of diligent study of other people’s

³⁶ I attribute the descriptive moniker *hāsī avadhūt* to Bill Mahony, who offered this name in a telephone conversation upon my earliest descriptions of Mastana Baba.

³⁷ The name Mastana Baba is an accidental pseudonym created from my personal adaptation and simplification of a longer title used by Mastana Baba-lovers (*premis*).

religion. It also brought a potent awareness to skepticism (more generally) about sympathetic scholarship in Religious Studies. Throughout the study, my approach in the field was sympathetic; I engaged in a hermeneutics of trust, a mentor observed, not one of suspicion.³⁸ Both the reviewer's comments and Gurumaa's watchful eye forced me to examine myself carefully in the field from the very beginning, even before I had interest in engaging in spiritual discipline for my own benefit, and before I had ever heard of the Sanskrit terms *ātmavicāra* or *sākṣī bhāva*.

In the study of religion, receptivity in the field finds its primary support in the academic discipline of Anthropology, where many ethnographers have demonstrated an ability to immerse themselves in their particular fields in such a way as to be open to transformation, reflect on it and remain true to scholarly ideals and methods. Barbara Myerhoff allowed herself to experience poignantly her encounters with Jewish elders in her field site, while her quasi insider-quasi outsider position informed her study (1978). Ann Grodzins Gold sweated it out on pilgrimage buses, struggled through language barriers, allowed the serendipity of the field to play out, and saw herself in new ways, reversing the gaze to observe how villagers in Rajasthan understood their encounters with "Ainn-Bai" (1988). Kirin Narayan noted her complicated exchange with a family guru, "Swami ji," who participated in her "academic business" by sharing his tales that she would then retell to new audiences through the sale of her books (1989). Meena Khandelwal chopped vegetables in ashram kitchens in Rishikesh and grappled with her own bodily performance when greeting the guru in whose ashram she spent the most

³⁸ As part of my "sympathetic" approach, I had abandoned other potential research subjects well before, because I felt no desire to spend years writing an exposé or to subject young children to research fields that I did not feel comfortable about because of known controversy or reluctance of insiders to allow scholars access.

time (2004). In the field of Religious Studies, one finds fewer examples of reflexive writing that voices receptivity to transformation. Corinne Dempsey found herself transformed into a “sari-pitching” insider in the rituals at the Sri Vidya temple in upstate New York, something she acknowledges as having come about in part from her extended associations, her own coming and going to and from the field site over time, as well as her direct encounters with the temple’s priest-guru, Aiya (2006). Related to this study, Aiya emphasized to Dempsey that, “one of the greatest impediments to encountering divinity is too much education” (Dempsey 2006: 201). These particular ethnographers’ experiences were of course different from my own, but their words and stances offer tremendous inspiration as well as affirmation that as human beings, ethnographers enter deeply and wholly into research fields and can remain true to the scholarly endeavor.

Over the course of time, and as my particular relationship with Gurumaa evolved, I began to ask her questions of a personal nature, something I figured could not hurt me (might even help), and was nonetheless a form of participant observation. I swallowed my scholarly pride to ask her opinion on the main thorny issue in my life, persistent headaches. This opened me up to all kinds of advice from her, on stress, on my academic endeavor, and it put me in the role as not only interviewing researcher, but also in the ever-familiar role of student (albeit, student in a new context). It must be said, however, that she would have seen me as student no matter what hat I chose to wear with her. She always wears the hat of teacher and she shows absolutely no hesitations with the role of spiritual master.

Religious Studies scholar Kristie Nabhan-Warren makes an assertive and recent call for “embodied ethnography,” not merely something to be considered as an “afterthought” when one is processing time spent in the field, but as the “very basis by which fieldwork is done” (Nabhan-Warren 2011: 384). She contends that Religious Studies ethnographers should examine not only the bodies of their research subjects and interlocutors, but also their own bodies, understood as vast sources of knowledge in the field. Nabhan-Warren writes of her own experience of crawling fully prostrate (with a fever) through the mud towards the statue of the Virgin Mary. Her own bodily participation as well as her illness in fieldwork prompted much self-examination.³⁹ Nabhan-Warren’s argument, one already made many times over the course of many years now in the field of Anthropology, remains somehow newly pertinent in conversations on ethnography in Religious Studies, where perhaps it has been easier to assume a false distance between the research field and our material realities since studies have more often focused on dead sages and founders and their words.⁴⁰ Her late argument indicates, along with my skeptic-reviewer’s comments, an underlying wave of critique within the field of Religious Studies against insider scholarship.

In my first moments in the “Buddhafield,” while checking in at the reservations desk, I was informed of all the “compulsory” activities—those daily bodily spiritual disciplines in which I was to participate, practices meant to nourish the body, “the temple of God,” such as meditation, postural yoga and breathing exercises as well as various yogic cleansing techniques.⁴¹ I sometimes participated in “dance meditation.”

³⁹ For a poignant and personal account of illness in fieldwork, see Roxanne Kamayani Gupta (2003).

⁴⁰ And also a field with its own identity issues, well noted by Daniel Gold (1988; 2003).

⁴¹ Gurumaa uses this phrase “temple of God” with regularity. It is also a phrase I recall from childhood as used prevalently in the Christian context. It does, however, have at least one Indian historical source that I know of. Basavarāja (12th century founder of the Virashaiva movement) wrote: “those who have riches

Each day of spiritual discipline began around 4:30 am. How could one do anything but an embodied ethnography in such an ashram? This ethnographer's body, in its difference and its similarities to those around it was part of the scene for a while—at one point, even photographed in yogic postures (*āsana*) that were later published in Gurumaa's *Soul Curry* magazine.⁴² Furthermore, Gurumaa herself scrutinized this researcher's body, sometimes publicly.

I do not know how I could have done anything *but* put my whole self into the field and then observe. In addition to eating and sleeping in the field, breathing the clean, non-polluted air there, and engaging in daily yogic practices designed to facilitate “experience,” I also participated in retreats (*shivir*) in the ashram that involved not just nasal cleansing but also full gastro-intestinal cleansing.⁴³ Living in this research field necessitated a full engagement of body as well as mind.

Certainly, many of my own insights come from the embodied experiences in the ethnographic setting. Sometimes this realization came while in the field engaged in the spiritual disciplinary practices, in the name of good “participant observation,” and sometimes it came at home, processing it all and continuing many of the practices received. In addition to living inside the ashram and following the ashram schedule like

build temples for Thee; what shall I build? I am poor. My legs are the pillars; this body of mine is the temple” (Raghavan 1958: 357). I quote and discuss Gurumaa's use of the phrase in Chapter 4.

⁴² Two photographs of me performing *āsana* appear in the ashram published magazine: “Curing Constipation through Yoga,” *Soul Curry*, May-June 2009. Vol. 3.4.

⁴³ The practice “washing the intestines” is called *shankhaprakshalana* or *varisara dhauti*, one of a number of practices taught to seekers who came from the US for a retreat designed specifically for them. See Swami Satyananda Saraswati's now famous yoga manual for more on this yogic practice along with other bodily cleansing techniques (*shatkarma*), practices taught to seekers in Gurumaa Ashram (Saraswati 1996). The retreat for US seekers was the first of its kind and referred to casually as the “NRI Shivir” by ashramites during the days of preparation. Though I am not a Non-resident Indian (NRI), I was allowed to participate by virtue of being from the US. There were a few other US citizens not of Indian descent who participated as well. All participants (besides me) had traveled to India specifically for the retreat. I was already there. The retreat's focus on postural yoga (*āsana*) and yogic cleansing, was quite similar to a prior “camp” (*shivir*) referred to as the Health Shivir held and conducted primarily in Hindi (drawing seekers almost entirely from India).

most any disciple would do, already a complete immersion into a field (there was no going “home” at night), I found myself in situations of close access to Gurumaa—receiving opportunities that most devotees only dream of and pray for, not to mention the ethnographic boon. Occasionally, I traveled with the guru, experiencing – through the eyes of devotees with whom I journeyed and stayed – the wonders and mystery involved in traveling with a saint. Traveling with Gurumaa, or without her to visit her devotees, I often found myself on the receiving end of devotees’ offerings of loving service (*sevā*) when I accepted their gracious hospitality.

Erica Bornstein writes reflexively and comparatively about her experiences in two different fieldwork sites to emphasize the importance of practicing reflection and discrimination about one’s degree of “belonging” in the field (2007). The conscientious ethnographer’s reflexivity helps her to discern how her relatedness and her presence affects not only the research itself but also those who share their lives with her in field (Bornstein 2007). Bornstein writes: “Those who welcome anthropologists into their worlds – whether informants, friends, or families – do it deeply, personally, emotionally, and temporarily” (485). Gurumaa’s observation of me, relationships established in the field, and questions asked of me by disciples, all served to make me aware that my own presence was also part of the field, that there was an exchange happening all the time. Sometimes that exchange seemed quite complicated to me. Additionally, I found, like Bornstein, that inhabiting the research field with family in tow, that fieldwork becomes life (497). It is no different from life anywhere else in regards to one’s ethical behavior and in being true to oneself. While in the field, one lives life. The difference lies in the fact that in fieldwork, the ethnographer comes and goes without the same social

obligations (503). In an ashram, however, where many come and go, I was not different from householders whose own *āna-jāna* was routine.

In addition to bringing members from my current nuclear family into the Buddhafield, all the members of my natal family visited as well. There is really no end to the ways in which adding another human being to the field site affects the ethnography, as Bornstein effectively demonstrates in her essay. My Jewish sister-in-law's baffled reaction to a devotee's enthusiastic comment, "Gurumaa is God for me!" prompted my own desire to make worship of the guru understandable for a Western, largely monotheistic audience, not accustomed to the Indian ideals of human perfection expressed in *guru-bhakti*. My younger sister's naming the ashram a "spiritual boot camp" brought to mind many of the differences between Gurumaa Ashram and the Osho International Resort, where similarly, a plethora of spiritual activities and disciplines are available but not "compulsory." Those who visited me in Gurumaa Ashram experienced a range of states and feelings about the place, from serenity to discomfort, and their reactions informed my own experience.⁴⁴

Perhaps most importantly, there is a present moment awareness that children bring to life, generally, and bring to the research field assertively. Barriers created by scholarly objectivity can be easily broken down for an ethnographer when she is playing her universal role of mother. Wherever children go, they have a way of making the place they inhabit home despite differences in culture, language and climate, and certainly regardless of research ideals such as "objectivity." Children, not typically allowed in Gurumaa Ashram, when they do come, usually do not move in and become part of the landscape as mine did. Most children who come, do so for short periods of

⁴⁴ The one who first felt Gurumaa Ashram was a "spiritual boot camp" came to appreciate it as such.

time and only for special celebrations.⁴⁵

Our daughter, Kayla, not only received a new name (Purnima) from the guru after being teased about the one her parents gave her (Kayla means “banana” in Hindi), but she also traveled the ashram grounds as if it were her own suburban neighborhood on a used bicycle we purchased in the Sonepat market, accepting indispensable aid of householder-seekers met in the ashram. Our son Kieran, when not attached to my leg, zipped around the ashram on a four-wheeled scooter, “talked back” to Gurumaa and received from her the nickname “chatterbox.” His behavior, less ideal than that of his older sister, was not only tolerated but also indulged by ashramites and householder ashram visitors alike. His Krishna-like naughtiness was often rewarded with chocolates. Gurmeet* our taxi-driver and Gurumaa-devotee-cum-interlocutor and friend, served as Kieran’s guru, insistent on training him to meditate by placing rewards of rupees and toffees underneath his seat, because he had learned from Gurumaa that Baba Sheik Farid’s mother trained him similarly by putting sweets under his prayer rug. Strong sentiment exists in the *loka* of *guru-bhakti* that children (though disruptive they may be in the ashram setting) are the most fortunate recipients of the guru’s grace and thereby possible future saints themselves. To this day, Gurmeet reminds me of Farid’s story and has offered other examples to enhance my mothering repertoire, such as *bhagats* Dhruv and Prahlad, two non-Sikh saints enlightened in childhood and extolled in the *Adi-Granth* as well as in Bhai Gurdas’ *Varan*. Gurumaa herself once explained to me – while I sat near with a child – how Indians drag their children to visit saints at every opportunity. Thankfully, she graciously offered the hospitality of the ashram to mine.

⁴⁵ Gurumaa hosts a *Youth Shivar* for one week every summer for youth ages 12 and older, which seems to be a combination of summer camp and spiritual boot camp.

She even tolerated Kieran's fidgety nature and his dogged insistence to sit inside the tent he created between my legs underneath the long ashram robe (*chola*) I wore, an act I endured to keep him quiet while Gurumaa spoke to me in ashram darshan sessions.

My methods of meeting devotees were organic. Many of my conversation partners were those first attracted to me or to the children in my care; I rarely sought out participants. Ashram living is not conducive to interviewing anyone other than the guru. Even interviews conducted outside were rather un-structured. Though I asked many of the same questions to disciples in various places, those questions often turned out to be more like conversation starters and less like structured interview questions. For this reason, I do not make any claims that this study will produce un-biased results. What I did learn much about from these informants was bhakti. In my own real and perhaps non-scholarly way, in being true to myself, I could only accept love with love, and I do not pretend to feel scholarly distance with "informants." By inviting me into their homes and sharing with me stories dear to their hearts, they shared their own greatest treasures with me and therefore I prefer to think of informants as interlocutors or better still, conversation partners. To protect their privacy and in accordance with my university research clearance, I have adopted the use of pseudonyms for all conversation partners in the study besides Gurumaa, her Right Hand Man* and Left Hand Man.* Those monikers (already pseudonyms of a sort) used in Gurumaa's community work perfectly well for these personalities, who would be impossible to disguise anyway.

Using my recorder was fine and even welcomed in the company of Gurumaa. But in the company of her devotees in the ashram, in local meditation centers and in

homes, it was out of place. Once I asked permission to use it and it was rejected. I found the best use of my handy digital recorder in dictation of field notes I would have written by hand, but could not do so on the bumpy ride back to my hotel from dinner or tea at the home of devotees. I felt *not* using it made me more attentive to the moment and a more active listener.

I found conversation partners inside the Buddhafield as well as in the larger circle of Gurumaa's body of disciples. That large outer circle, itself somewhat boundary-less, continues to grow through Internet "networks." Inside that less-bounded larger circle exist smaller circles and networks—communities of Gurumaa's disciples who relate to one another by nature of their geographic proximity, or by their Internet "connections." Groups formed around meditation centers and less formal *satsang* groups exist in various cities alongside facebook "user groups" formed in conversation about particular issues of interest, such as Gurumaa's Shakti NGO or the cause of female feticide, a contemporary social issue about which Gurumaa has much to say. For the material and virtual communities, the hub is in the ashram itself, the epicenter and home to Gurumaa, the one whom devotees see as their contemporary age Buddha.

Within the Indian context of charismatic medieval *bhaktas*, Sufi *pirs* and Hindi *sants* who taught knowledge backed by "experience" on the path of bhakti often criticized their more scholarly oriented teaching peers on the path of knowledge (*jñāna*). These poet-saints and sages sometimes took it as their task to broaden the "conversation" relating to the Spirit, to expand the audience beyond the highly philosophical Sanskrit-literate or Arabic-literate elite audiences. *Bhaktas* and *jñānīs* therefore can sometimes find themselves at odds with one another. Fellow Mastana

Baba-lovers (*premis*) shared with me a story of how our laughing Baba once met a famous Sikh TV *giani* and he boldly told the man to his face that he had no experience, only book-learning. Story has it that the *giani* woefully agreed with Mastana Baba and begged for his grace, sometime after which he gained his own experience. Such tales exist in lore and in song over the centuries. Bulleh Shah, 18th century Sufi mystic poet, and a favorite conversation partner of Gurumaa, sang:

Gather no more knowledge, O Friend!
This knowledge will be of no avail.
All that you need to know is Alif.⁴⁶
Gather no more knowledge, O Friend! (Puri and Shangari 219).

In the century prior to Bulleh, Sultan Bahu, another favorite Punjabi Sufi conversation partner, sang:

Having learned wisdom from a thousand books, they become great scholars.
They cannot learn one letter of love—the wretches wander in ignorance.
If a lover glances just once, he can swim a hundred million rivers.
If the scholar looks a hundred million times, he cannot reach the other bank.
Between learning and love is an arduous journey, with many miles of distance.
Whoever does not gain love, Bahu, is a loser in both worlds. (Elias 2001: 48).

Upon reflection, I have come to understand Gurumaa as she has presented herself to me – directly – as a new version of a sage who spends her life’s energy singing from the heart and sharing what she calls her “treasure.” Utilizing the same frame of reference, yet reversing the gaze, one might see Angela as new version of scholar encountering the sage—loaded down with the heavy burden of her books. In this frame, it is the sage’s job to chide and chastise the scholar for trying to “cram it all up” (as Gurumaa’s puts it), to challenge the scholarly task of seeking knowledge through book-learning and to tackle the scholarly ego in order to do what sages do, to bring that

⁴⁶ *Alif* is the first letter of the Arabic alphabet.

scholar-now-student to a place where she might “experience” first hand what she has been trying to learn.

My task was “taken to task” not only by Gurumaa but also by some of my disciple-interlocutors, revealing another side of skepticism to my scholarly endeavor. “How can you possibly express all that the Master is in words, when the Master can never be described in words?” was a sentiment devotees verbalized to me over and over again. One woman explained that her willingness to participate in my project came only after Gurumaa’s intervention. Geeta* was in the ashram to participate in a special training, one to which hundreds submitted applications, but for which only a handful were chosen. Gurumaa invited me to sit in on her special lecture on the body’s respiratory and gastro-intestinal systems. My invitation, like most I received from Gurumaa, came suddenly. In this case just after a class had begun, Gurumaa stated aloud that Angela should be here. Upon hearing this, Geeta thought to herself, “How can Angela possibly engage in a research project on Gurumaa? Why is Gurumaa allowing her to participate?” At the very moment these thoughts arose, Geeta later explained, Gurumaa singled her out from the small crowd and asked her to go find Angela and invite her into the classroom. After this incident, Geeta felt more comfortable with me as a conversation partner, but she still could not imagine how I could possibly express the essence of Gurumaa in words.

Most of my conversation partners were Gurumaa-lovers, ardent *guru-bhaktas*. Even those who were not devotees, usually family members and friends of Gurumaa’s disciples, were often admirers. My stories of Gurumaa, therefore, are colored by their devotion, though I do attempt to present their voices as theirs. Despite whatever slant

this may suggest, because of devotees' own strong bias toward devotion and their fluid expression of it to me, I feel particularly qualified to write about the topic of *guru-bhakti*. I have seen it first hand. Sometimes I was received with a level of devotional offering that touched me deeply and also necessitated serious self-discrimination.

To experience Indian hospitality (already epic in its own right) as it merges with service to the guru (*guru-sevā*), is to experience it exponentially. I regularly explained to my disciple-hosts that I was not a devotee of their guru, but rather, that I am writing a dissertation about her. But if they had been praying for some sign of their guru's love or for some *sevā* from her, and then I showed up for tea with my questions, having lived in their guru's ashram, in the spirit of *guru-kripa*, I suppose I could have been seen as a saint in disguise as foreign scholar, or perhaps more simply as "emissary" from their guru's ashram.⁴⁷ Despite my explanations some people saw me as both of those. One woman told me that she had never been able to meet Gurumaa face to face, that she had been like Shabari waiting and waiting. My showing up was like Lord Rama coming to her home.⁴⁸ I was the recipient of Indian dharmic hospitality and *guru-sevā* combined, a heavy acceptance, adding a contemporary day layer to *gr̥hastha dharma* on hospitality. Nonetheless, it was always easy to see with *guru-bhaktas* that the offerings I received were really directed to their Beloved. I was receiving the love of devotees for

⁴⁷ India's "epic" hospitality has its roots in the proper roles for householders (*gr̥hāstha dharma*) as it was laid out in the *Dharmashastras*. Studying this topic in 1987, I observed corollaries between hospitality offered to the guest and deity worship (*pūjā*) performed in the home (Kane 1941: 705-835). To the guest and to the deity, the householder should offer food, bathe, put to bed, and wake in the morning. To either the god at the home shrine or the guest who appears at the door, the householder offers food, food, and more food. According to these early medieval ethical codes for householders, no guest should be turned away; even a heretic or a thief should be offered something (Kane 1941: 752). A tired and hungry person could be a god or holy person in another form. In the *Dharmashastras* there are varied layers to the offerings a Brahmin householder makes to the guest depending on caste and spiritual knowledge of each. There are also specific merits listed for these hospitalities. If a *yati* spends a single night, the householder's sins are destroyed, and if he takes food, it is Vishnu himself who is fed (Kane 1941: 752-54).

⁴⁸ My host refers here to a story in the epic, *Ramayana*, in which a low-caste woman (Shabari) knows that one day Lord Rama will come to her home, so for many years she prepares each day for Rama's arrival.

their Gurudev and I tried my best to do so with honesty and with discrimination. My Teacher offered an observance of the fine line I was treading in my own academic and spiritual *sādhana*—participating in devotion without getting stuck in it.

Devotees were also great teachers and aids, sometimes giving material resources for my study in addition to offering their stories. Because of my scholarly interest, many took me to nearby ashrams and spiritual centers in their areas, knowing that I desired a view of spiritual settings alternative to Gurumaa Ashram—and to prevent my inevitable “dangerous” travel to these centers alone. In addition to meeting the laughing saint, Mastana Baba, I met an elderly silent swami who answered questions by pen and paper—an Udasi Sikh teacher in the lineage of Guru Nanak’s son Sri Chand, whose ashram attracts many Europeans.⁴⁹ I met a female spiritual teacher (a widow, perhaps in her 60s) in Amritsar who attracts Sikhs and Hindus alike and holds bi-weekly *satsang* in her simple apartment’s salon. I saw many *gurdwaras* in Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, and Himanchal Pradesh and visited saints’ shrines in Punjab and Maharashtra. I had an afternoon visit to the Radhasoami Satsang in Beas. While driving from Jalandhar to Beas, Gurumaa’s devotee looked at me (seated in the back), and explained that when he saw me in his rear view mirror it was like looking into his own guru’s face. Stunned, I explained that I was not an emissary, I had not been sent, but was merely a researcher. He came back with a story about Bulleh Shah, whose family, disappointed not to see Bulleh’s spiritual master (Inayat Khan) himself at a family wedding, neglected the envoy sent in his stead, angering the master greatly.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Guru Nanak’s spiritual legacy, according to the Sikh tradition, rested not with his son Sri Chand, but rather, with his pupil Lahina, to whom Nanak gave the name Guru Angad (limb of the guru). For more about the diversity in the Sikh panth, see Harjot Oberoi (1994).

⁵⁰ Once devotees of Gurumaa learned that I had planned to visit Beas on my own, they insisted on chauffeuring me instead. (Some even insisted on personally passing me to the next Gurumaa-devotee once my itinerary was discovered—making certain by phone call that I would be received at my next

“Embodied ethnography” may help to facilitate a scholar’s intuitive knowledge in a way parallel to a *bhakta’s* “experience” of the emergence of knowledge from within the heart. On the fieldwork journey and in the spiritual journey alike self-discernment has an important place. Having English-typing *sevā* as my ashram work assignment kept me cognizant of my two roles, one as ashram-scribe in the name of participant observation, and the other as scholar who would read and reread those typed transcripts in the act of studying the speaker as research subject.⁵¹ Having a “living guru” as opposed to a “dead guru” is crucial to a spiritual seeker’s evolution, Gurumaa regularly insists, for only the living guru can destroy one’s ego. Perhaps there is a parallel for religionists in this too. Being in conversation with a living, responding research subject, I warn, may be hazardous to the scholarly ego. My role is not to promote Anandmurti Gurumaa, to dissect her life or to evaluate her enlightened status, but rather, to share a relevant 21st century voice with new audiences. This act is not so different from that of the scholar who translates texts or stories of and about dead sages.

station.) This devotee also gifted me with a Bulleh Shah book in which I would find this story along with a substantial collection of Bulleh’s poems (*kalams*) in English. I later received more riches from the Bulleh Shah treasury of tales from my cab driver and friend, Gurmeet, who often retold Gurumaa’s stories when ferrying me between Delhi and the ashram. In both the spirit of academic endeavor as well as continuing a conversation with Gurumaa, voices like Bulleh Shah’s and Sahajo Bai’s enter the dialogue with regularity.

⁵¹ Some of my own complicated acts of the preservation and re-presentation of the guru’s Word are more explicitly explored in chapter 6, where I write about becoming a typist in Gurumaa’s Live Chat program and of my English typing *sevā*.

CHAPTER 2 Gurus and Disciples

Introductions

Sahajo Bai

Sahajo Bai, an 18th century female *sant* and “important guru in her own right” (Gold 1987a: 77), captured my attention even before I first entered the gates of Gurumaa Ashram in 2008.⁵² At gurumaa.com, I had seen a photograph of the ashram’s Sahajo Bai statue and knew something of her “legendary devotion” to her own teacher, *sant* Charandas of Delhi. Daniel Gold, writes, “Sahajo Bai, as a woman *sant* in the 18th century India, must have demonstrated the strength and independence of soul that we have seen to be characteristic of ‘holy men’” (1987a: 83). Indeed, hers seems to be the only feminine voice left for us in a sea of male *sant*’s Hindi songs. Perhaps for this reason, I imagined, she is a potent symbol for Anandmurti Gurumaa, another female poet we might easily characterize as having “strength and independence of soul.” At first, I was more interested in Sahajo’s gender than in the contours of her bhakti, at least, until Gurumaa offered further introduction.

Sitting just inside the ashram’s first gate, Sahajo Bai’s statue (*mūrti*) provides a visual entry to *guru-bhakti*.⁵³ Moreover, Sahajo sits quite centrally within the ashram’s physical space – both geographically and symbolically – for she occupies meaningful space, atop a small raised garden bed quite near the temple (*mandir*). Also adjacent to

⁵² According to translators Harry Aveling and Sudha Joshi in their introduction to Sahajo Bai’s poetry, *Sahaj Prakash: The Brightness of Simplicity*, Sahajo Bai was born 1725 CE (I cannot find the date of her death, but her guru, Charandas, 22 years her elder, died in 1782.). Though originally from Rajasthan, she lived out her days in Delhi nearby the Charandas’ temple (Gold 1987a: 84; Aveling and Joshi 2001: xvi)

⁵³ Since 2009, a new gate is used as main entrance to the ashram, and therefore Sahajo Bai is no longer one’s first sight. However, Sahajo still occupies a central and meaningful space in the ashram (as detailed above) by proximity to temple, meditation hut, and Gurumaa’s darshan garden. Gurumaa refers to Sahajo’s sculpture as *mūrti*.

Sahajo are the ashram's meditation hut (suitably named after *Patanjali*, the ascribed author of the *Yoga Sutras*) and the grassy garden where Gurumaa is apt to offer morning and evening darshan sessions seated in her swing (*jhūlā*).⁵⁴ Sahajo Bai, with hair loose and seated in cross-legged, “easy” or “simple” pose (*sahājāsana*) was a potent, early fieldwork image for me. For many residents of the ashram, she also serves as an ever-ready model of perfect, one-pointed devotion to the master.

It was not Sahajo Bai's gender, however, that makes her an icon for Gurumaa. It was rather, Sahajo's love, simplicity and surrender. About one week into my first ashram stay, I was sitting in the grassy garden for evening darshan with Gurumaa—this time ready with my questions—and I asked Gurumaa about Sahajo Bai and her centrality in the ashram. Sahajo embodied surrender, Gurumaa explained.⁵⁵ She quickly noted that surrender in Indian spirituality is not the same as the weakness and powerlessness that comes to the “Western mind” when hearing the word “surrender.” She stated, “In Western mind set when you hear surrender, it means defeat, but in Hindi language when we use *samarpan* it doesn't mean a defeat, it actually means you are victorious by surrendering.” She explained that bowing down to the teacher in

⁵⁴ “Darshan” occurs in both planned and unplanned scenarios in Gurumaa ashram. In both ways, darshan, true to its more literal meaning, seeing (and being seen), refers to seeing and often sitting near a holy person or deity. Disciples call any sighting or exchange of sight with the guru an event of darshan. For example, at the Radhasoami ashram in Beas, hoards of people line the sidewalks daily for darshan of the Mahatma through the window of his car as he is driven by. Though Gurumaa's comings and goings were not announced, in her ashram, viewing Gurumaa through her automobile window as she leaves, or passing her on the walkways of the ashram's interior when she's out for her evening exercise are both considered darshan by devotees. When she is in the ashram, Gurumaa also sets aside time for darshan sessions each day to greet people on the grassy lawn or at another comfortable meeting area that suits the size of her assembly. The most typical place for darshan sessions is the grassy lawn where Gurumaa sits in her swing.

Diana Eck's now classic work on the subject of darshan is a great place to learn about the concept of seeing and being seen (Eck 1996). See Daniel Gold's work for a discussion of darshan of the human guru in the context of the north Indian *sants* (1987a). In later work, Gold offers examples of spontaneous *guru-darshan* in the setting of the American ashram of contemporary guru, Swami Chidvilasananda of Siddha Yoga (1995). Smriti Srinivas, in her work on Satya Sai Baba, calls darshan an act of “inter-ocular devotion,” naming darshan the “central ritual moment” (Srinivas 2010: 5).

⁵⁵ Darshan discourse transcript, Gurumaa Ashram, audio recording: 18 February 2008.

samarpan happens naturally, out of “love and respect,” not from being conquered. “It’s all together a different philosophy, it has an all together different flavor to it.”⁵⁶

Gurumaa identified Sahajo as “the complete disciple.” In identifying herself totally with her love for her master, Gurumaa explained, Sahajo emptied herself and became the perfect vessel for divine love and the perfect vehicle for her master’s wisdom. That wisdom arose in Sahajo Bai naturally, simply and with ease, as her name suggests, not from toiling with books, she pointed out to me. “It is very hard. You read a few books, you become proud. You read more books, you become more proud. You get a few D. Lits and you become arrogant.”⁵⁷ But Sahajo's wisdom, Gurumaa contrasts, arose naturally, not from sitting in *satsang*, not from reading books, but from within, and by means of her love for and her surrender to her master. The word *sahaj* in Sikh scripture, the *Adi Granth*, is often translated into English as “intuitive ease” to describe the way that knowledge arises from contact with and meditation on the Word of the true guru.⁵⁸ Gurumaa emphasized an important characteristic of Sahajo Bai’s surrender, and I paraphrase: though she was a prolific and celebrated songwriter, she attributed all of her knowledge, all of her learning and all of her attainment to her guru's grace (*kripā*), never claiming any of it as her own.

This chapter’s conversation is a *kitchari* of sorts, a porridge created to bring together a variety of discourses on the guru-disciple relationship.⁵⁹ Here, voices come

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

⁵⁸ “Word” (*shabad* and *shabd*) according to Sikh and *sant* *bānī* is often simply God's name (*nām*), as given by the guru. It can also be understood as mantra given by the guru (*guru-mantra* in Hindi and *gur-mantar* in Punjabi). The revered Sikh practice of *nām simran* it has precedent in the Hindu spiritual practice of *nām smaraṇa*, “remembrance of [God’s] name.”

⁵⁹ Gurumaa’s talks are their own kind of “*kitchari*.” In addition to the mix of sources she uses in her discourse, her language too is often a mix. In Florida in 2008, Gurumaa referred to her language switching (from Hindi to English and back again) as a *kitchari*. Usually translated as porridge, *kitchari* is a popular north Indian dish in which lentils and rice are mixed together with spices, to create the ultimate comfort

together from Sanskrit scripture to vernacular songs, from scholarly sources to teachings of Gurumaa and other modern gurus. I add to these voices personal field narratives, which include stories from Gurumaa’s devotees regarding their attractions and spiritual transformations in the guru-disciple relationship along with stories pertaining to masters and disciples offered to me in various ways in the context of fieldwork. This *kitchari* of voices attempts to cross time as it leads us into the discussion of 21st century *guru-bhakti* in the context of the “path of the guru” (*guru-mārga*), a millennia-old “tradition,” which has spanned multiple ages and has long been understood as a viable path for the attainment of liberation (*moksha*) within the South Asian context.⁶⁰

A “heavy” word: guru

Revered teachers have played an integral function in Indian religious traditions since well before the Common Era. The idea of a human being serving as a channel for divine revelation is at least as old as the *Vedas*.⁶¹ We find textual evidence in the *Atharvaveda* for the significance of the student-teacher relationship and its “fundamentally spiritual dimensions” from as early as 1000 B.C.E. (Mahony 1997: 223). Even if the earliest Vedic rishis were not gurus, per se, their words – songs – were believed to have come from an

food.

⁶⁰ *Mārga* is generally translated as “path” or “way.” Therefore, the *guru-mārga* is the “path or way of guru.” A synonym would be *guru-yoga*. In this case, the term *yoga* is understood in its broader sense (also the way it is typically used in Sanskrit) to indicate a method or way of joining – yoking – one thing to another. In *guru-yoga*, the devotee joins herself with the guru (more specifically, with the guru’s state) because the guru has attained that which she wishes to attain. The devotee unites with the state that is the guru.

⁶¹ For a helpful discussion of the various shades of meaning of “revelation,” see Pashaura Singh (2000: 7-16). In the Sikh context, the Gurus’ word is understood as expression of Truth “heard” and Truth felt, articulated and understood through particular times and places through particular bodied agents. Singh discusses Sikh revelation in the context of specific, relevant traditions of revelation, namely Vedic and Muslim, which both informed the early Sikh understandings of Nanak as “god’s mouthpiece” (*gurmukh*).

eternal Source, and over the course of ages, these words, in the form of sacred songs, ritual instructions and philosophical mystical teachings have been understood within the Hindu tradition to carry with them other-worldly, divine, transformative power.

In its earliest Sanskrit usage, the literal meaning of the word guru is “heavy” or “weighty.” William K. Mahony explains that beyond this word’s original function as an adjective, guru later came to usage as a noun to indicate “teacher,” perhaps because a teacher in ancient Indian culture was held in such high esteem he would have been afforded a “weighty” position (Mahony 1997: 239). Gold explains that even if devotees of a guru are not necessarily aware of the meaning of the word guru, they nonetheless would “see the guru as heavy in many ways: a guru’s authority is weighty; a guru’s presence is imposing” (Gold 1995: 230).

The heaviness of the guru was certainly something that I saw and felt in the field, both in American and Indian contexts. Our six-year-old daughter, Kayla, experienced this when she first met Gurumaa in Melbourne, Florida. Entering a hotel conference space reserved for darshan, she and I took our place in the line of strangers waiting to approach Gurumaa. Devotees’ gift giving and bowing down that she would later take as commonplace – at first sight – greatly overwhelmed Kayla. The solemnity of the entire scene, nothing like she had experienced before caused her to break into tears. Disciples quickly came to my aid offering loving words of understanding, telling us that Gurumaa’s presence is very powerful and it was perfectly natural for people react to her with tears. Others, thinking more like I was, presumed that the unusual scene frightened her, that she was awed by the reverence shown to the woman seated in the raised upholstered chair. To make it easier for us, disciples pushed us to the front

of the line, where Kayla quickly rebounded from her initial reaction and shyly offered Gurumaa the handful of sea shells we had just picked up on the beach.⁶²

Tall, confident and independent, this Punjabi woman has an imposing presence to be sure. “She carries herself like a statesman,” a devotee in Mohali, Punjab explained to me. He elaborated, “When Gurumaa enters a room, it’s as if Guru Govind Singh himself has walked into the room.” When Gurumaa walks onto a stage with many hundreds in the assembly to offer darshan or give a talk, or even when she walks into the grassy garden area with 30 disciples eagerly waiting, all stand and that space becomes immediately silent. When she gets up to leave, all stand again in reverence. When Gurumaa returns to her ashram from a teaching tour, it is to an ashram more immaculately clean than it was when she departed. Others who accompanied or followed me to the field over the course of my three research trips quickly understood the weighty qualities of Gurumaa. Never having met an Indian guru before, they were awed to see disciples stopping activity to bow down to Gurumaa’s feet as she passed them on the ashram path during her evening walk. They noted to me how some devotees sat the entire day in a prime vantage spot on the large ashram lawn to watch Gurumaa’s home from afar for sign of movement, hoping for a mere glimpse (or a very rare invitation). On her first day in the ashram, my sister suggested the two of us sit on the lovely swing (*jhūlā*) in the garden. Already accustomed to ashram living, I enjoyed a laugh at her proposal; the soft and inviting cushions had just been placed upon the *jhūlā* for Gurumaa. Absolutely no one would consider sitting on any of Gurumaa’s cozy

⁶² In response to my stated realization moments before on the beach that we had come without a gift, Kayla suggested we collect shells, so that is what we offered. At this time, Gurumaa was meeting disciples from particular regions of the country, separately, for darshan. Typically, when Gurumaa enters a room for large events, there is not an opportunity for seekers to speak to her directly, to offer their gifts, or to bow down (if that is their inclination to do so). During her meditation camps, she sets aside time for these meetings with smaller groups.

seats carefully placed at various sites around the ashram and kept ready in the event she might appear. Even if Gurumaa were not sitting in her seat at the time, one would never occupy the seat of the teacher, though from time to time, I would see a devotee bow down to it.

On occasion, Gurumaa would walk into the morning postural yoga (*āsana*) class to her reserved rattan chair at the front. When she did, I could feel the room change; ashram visitors as well as full-time residents responded at once to her presence with awe and reverence, as if each had taken a sudden in breath of surprise at the same moment. At one such time she walked in while I was balanced in side arm plank pose. Not seeing her, I became aware of the change in the room as a hush and stillness took over the atmosphere. Suddenly, Gurumaa walked right in front of my eyes and while everyone else in the room stood in *pranām* with hands folded towards her in prayer pose (*añjali mudrā*), I wondered what I should do and struggled to maintain my balance. Indeed, she had come that day in her sword-wielding Durga mode, out to slash egos, rearrange *sevā* assignments and shake things up in the ashram.

In addition to the weightiness of the guru's persona, a disciple considers the guru's words to be *heavy*, or laden with meaning and wisdom.⁶³ Indeed many devotees of contemporary Indian gurus, including Gurumaa's, contend that their guru speaks the "Truth" (*satya*), that the words or teachings uttered by the "true teacher" (*satguru*)

⁶³ In a way perhaps less relevant to this discussion, though also notable, the guru may have come to be understood as "heavy" due to the transformation of his human body into a perfected, more "dense" and "heavy" one. See David White's "Why Gurus are Heavy" for a linguistic study that discusses the power of symbols in Hindu alchemical texts alongside yogic and Tantric texts (White 1984). Particularly, White examines the root-metaphor of subtle, purified mercury as having the capability of turning base metals into gold. For our purposes, it is notable that the guru is often thought through his own transformed and purified body to have the capacity to transform and purify others. And the metaphor of turning base metal into gold is a prevalent one in guru bhakti poetry from medieval time until today as well as in the tantra, yogic and alchemical texts discussed by White.

come not entirely from the external body of the particular teacher, but rather, from an eternal Source accessed through that guru's communion with the Absolute. Though there have been some major cultural shifts over the course of history in terms of social status, gender, language and accessibility that have changed the demographic particularities of Indian gurus and their disciples, there also have been some remarkable continuities, especially in the guru's *heavy* task of making eternal Truth accessible to disciples in particular temporal settings.

I would add to these a common contemporary notion that the word "guru" itself has become heavy, or as we would say in American English: the word guru when used for a spiritual teacher is a *loaded* word. Many have negative associations with the word.⁶⁴ Americans, particularly, have become wary of "Eastern" gurus after public scandals surrounding immigrant spiritual masters such as Chogyam Trungpa, Rajneesh Osho and others. In her tremendously popular memoir, *Eat, Pray, Love*, Elizabeth Gilbert writes about the word guru, "As a general rule, Westerners aren't comfortable with that word." Gilbert contributes this to their "kind of sketchy recent history," in which "wealthy, eager, susceptible young Western seekers collided with a handful of charismatic but dubious Indian gurus" (2006: 124-25). She then juxtaposes Americans' adverse reactions with more positive reactions of Indians, who "grew up with the Guru principal" and are "relaxed with it."⁶⁵ In contrast, I have heard plenty of skepticism expressed about gurus by contemporary Indians from different classes, caste backgrounds and genders—albeit mainly outside of the ashram setting. Such skepticism

⁶⁴ Even in scholarship it seems that gurus are heavy. Scholars interested in gurus or writing favorably of them may be considered to possess non-scientific motivations in their study.

⁶⁵ Of course, it should be noted that Gilbert's exploration of India occurred in the interior space of a spiritual community, a contemporary guru's ashram, where "the guru principal" would have been a dominant theological concept. She acknowledges conversation with a young Indian girl in the ashram as her source.

exists not only among Marxist leaning academics, but also among spiritual seekers themselves. If we can broadly generalize that Indians are comfortable with the guru principal, I offer another generalization that every Indian knows someone who has been duped by a false guru.

“Guru business,” as it is referred to in popular press, in India is indeed big business for true and false gurus alike, and in some ways might be likened to the American phenomenon of evangelical tent “revival” preaching.⁶⁶ Today’s teachers, whose discourses are advertised and broadcast widely, draw in the tens of thousands for live public audiences and have exponentially greater potential – or imagined – audiences of the media reproductions of those talks. A giant leap in broadening the audience came with the advent of satellite communications technology allowing TV gurus to make their teachings available on a global scale, a 21st century phenomenon of Indian popular culture.⁶⁷ The already unknown potential audience now grows even larger with contemporary gurus’ more recent entrée into YouTube, podcasts and other public Internet platforms. In our conversations about my research project, a friend and Buddhist teacher (*āchārya*) from Delhi, trained in the lineage of Thich Nhat Hanh (the

⁶⁶ On more than one occasion sitting under one of Gurumaa’s tents (*pandāl*) around India with thousands in attendance, I recognized – at least on the surface – similarities to the tent revivals I saw set up on fairgrounds in the American South where I grew up, a region also known as the Bible Belt. I describe Gurumaa’s large public discourse setting in Chapter 6 in the context of her traveling *Amrit Varsha* program. In India, these *pandāl* events happen without the offering plate, but offerings (*dakṣiṇā*) are made to the guru, especially from devotees who participate in *darshan* sessions. In the Indian tent setting, sales of CDs, books and other media occur at tables lining the back of the tent, a practice I have seen repeated at events in the US for Mata Amritanandamayi and for Gurumaa as well. Further comparison between the phenomena might prove useful, but is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

⁶⁷ Journalist Renuka Narayanan writes about India’s guru “televangelists” offering “bhakti on toast” via satellite religious television channels modeled on Christian television networks in operation in India. Gurus like Anandmurti Gurumaa, one of her article’s subjects, create their programs from the “spin-offs of their praxis” (Narayanan 2002). Recently, the BBC aired a news story, by Sunita Thackur. *Heart and Soul: India’s TV Gurus*. BBC World Service, First Broadcast: 18 Feb 2012. Thackur’s story focuses on “New Age TV guru” Baba Ram Dev, who is popular for his combination of *āsana* instruction and health guidance. See: http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p00np2qt/Heart_And_Soul_Indias_TV_Gurus/.

Vietnamese monk is arguably a *mahā-guru* in his own right), has pejoratively referred to India's contemporary guru business as “gurudom.”

On one level, “gurudom” can be understood like any sort of fame. Not only is it somewhat tenuous, especially so without a lineage, but it is sometimes ill sought and gained. And perhaps no one enjoys the false gurus quite like the press, or other gurus. The problem of the false teacher underlies all prescriptives to choose wisely, a topic given some attention even in ancient scriptures. In the form of Shiva's words to Parvati, the *Guru Gita* addresses the topic of false gurus extensively.⁶⁸ Words of Kabir, other *sants*, as well as the Sikh gurus indicate in ages prior to our own the incidence of false gurus—spiritual teachers motivated by material gain rather than compassion for students.

Despite the loaded term and the general “weightiness” of the guru that I experienced in the field, never during fieldwork did I hear reference to the word guru as meaning “heavy.” What I heard repeated most, from Gurumaa in song and spoken word, as well as from other contemporary gurus, is that the word “gu-ru” means one who dispels darkness. Those who teach this meaning of the word explain that the syllable “gu” means darkness and “ru” means light, though they rarely offer their source of this as scholars might wish for them to (Gurumaa 2011a: 11). Charpentier identifies two scriptural sources for the dark-light-syllable-explanation of the word guru: the 11th century *Kulārṇāva Tantra* and the *Guru Gita* (2010: 59). According to the *guru-mārga*, the guru, as dispeller of darkness, lights the lamp of knowledge (*jñāna*) for the seeker and also has the ability to ignite the fire of a non-seeker's own desire for liberation. In the Indian tradition of guruhood, therefore, the guru is the one who lights

⁶⁸ The *Guru Gita* (*Guruḡītā*, Song of the Guru) is a scripture immensely popular in contemporary guru-devotion but its origins remain somewhat mysterious. It is often attributed to the *Skanda Purāṇa*. For more on the obscure origins of the text, see Charpentier (2010) and Douglas Renfrew Brooks (1997).

the seeker's path towards full awakening to his own inner knowledge, glossed in English as *en-lightenment*. The prevalence of this understanding of guru as dispeller of darkness (ignorance) cannot be understated.

At the time of Diwali in Gurumaa Ashram, devoted students arrived from all over India and other countries to celebrate their own lamp lighter. In a style characteristic of her contemporary speech, Gurumaa explained to her audience of 500 or so the meaning of the “inner Diwali,” which has “nothing to do with bursting of crackers and everything to do with your mind.” She asked the crowd forcefully, “Is your mind illuminated? ... The Master is the match box from where this light comes into you.”

A consistent notion held among those who considered themselves initiated by a guru, certainly among Gurumaa’s students, and nearly everyone I met in the context of spiritual communities, is that having a guide on the spiritual path is indispensable, despite the fact that many gurus out there are fraudulent. The “guru principal” is the common gloss for *guru tattva*, that principal which creates and sustains the universe and also lives within each individual as the “inner guru.” Gilbert correctly identifies this as a prevalent concept, at least among *guru-bhaktas* (even if it does not accurately characterize contemporary Indians as a whole). Ashrams of gurus indeed might not survive, much less thrive without such a principal in place. Even though all seekers possess *guru tattva*, they do not all gain access to it, and for most seekers, the “inner guru” is understood to be completely elusive without the guidance of the outer, physical guru. Because it is the human guru who *embodies* this principal for the seeker, that guru makes the inner guru accessible. I found this idea common among Gurumaa’s followers as well as reflected in the words of other contemporary era Indian gurus.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Swami Satyananda Saraswati (d. 2011) of the Bihar School of Yoga and Swami Muktananda of Siddha

Whether the seeker identifies the human guru as the perfect embodiment of *guru tattva* or as Self-realized (and arguably these are the same since all words fail to describe liberation—Tantric or Vedantic in origin), the guru is both the teacher in physical body and the eternal essence. The guru’s job, then, is to guide the seeker to realize his own *guru tattva* and enter into his own relationship with the Self or God (Gurumaa’s usual Hindi correlative for God is *Paramātmā*, Supreme Self).

Ancient discourse and myth models

In South Asian religious traditions, evidence for veneration directed towards the teacher of revelatory truths, or interpreter and commentator of those revelations, exists from at least as early as the late Vedic period in the *Upanishads*, philosophical treatises, many of which take the form of conversation in which the student questions and the teacher answers. A text dating around the 4th century B.C.E., the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* instructs, “let him take fuel [for the sacred fire] in hand and approach a guru who is learned in the scriptures and firmly established in the Absolute” (Mahony 1997: 239).⁷⁰ This short passage indicates much regarding the relationship of the guru and disciple. The student brings wood for the guru’s ceremonial sacred fire, an act of service (*sevā*) to the guru and his work in keeping the ritual fire. But the words in this passage also carry an important assumption, that a guru *ought* to be fully established in a higher

Yoga (d. 1982) both spoke at length about the “inner guru” (*guru tattva*). I name these two modern gurus because of theological similarities between their teachings and Gurumaa’s. While the Bihar School of Yoga has outwardly put much focus on the practice of hatha yoga, gaining most of its Western exposure through the teaching of *āsana*, Siddha Yoga has emphasized meditation practice. Gurumaa’s movement, though it also takes inspiration from Vedanta, Bhakti and Tantra like these other schools, stands apart for its strong influence of Sikh religious teachings (scripture strongly influenced by Vedanta and Bhakti). In the Bihar School, Siddha Yoga and in Gurumaa’s yet-unbranded fold (ie. no new Yoga), guru-devotion has been a primary emphasis. For more on *guru tattva* from the two schools mentioned, see Swami Muktananda (1980/1999) and Swami Satyangananda Saraswati and Swami Satyananda Saraswati’s co-written work (1984).

⁷⁰ Brackets in Mahony’s translation, not added here.

state, “in the Absolute,” and that a student *ought* to use discrimination in choosing his teacher, both ideas still firmly held within guru traditions today. Thus, many seekers spend a great deal of time and energy actively seeking the right teacher and cross comparing the wisdom they hear and see embodied in each.

Shankaracarya, 8th century (C.E.) philosopher and proponent of *Advaita-Vedanta*, a non-dualism that has been marked by experiential knowledge of the Self rather than devotion to form, wrote extensively on the guru-disciple bond and the qualities of each participant in this powerful relationship. A work attributed to Shankara, the *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, begins with a sentiment still commonly held on the *guru-mārga* (verse 3): “These are three things which are rare indeed and are due to the grace of God—namely a human birth, the longing for liberation, and the protecting care of a perfected sage” (Swāmī Mādhavānanda 2003: 2).⁷¹

Dharma literature from around the beginning of the Common Era such as *Dharmasutra* and *Dharmashastra* texts give instructions on proper reverence and conduct towards one’s spiritual teacher. In the *Dharmasūtra of Āpastamba*, we find caste-specific instructions for the student living in the *gurukula* (school for scriptural study and spiritual learning, often in the guru’s home), from how to greet the teacher in the morning to how to put the teacher to bed at night (Olivelle 1999: 9-14). More than once I heard Gurumaa berate her audience for not knowing how to act appropriately in the guru’s presence. In Florida, she critically observed her meditation retreat participants, “You people don’t even know how to *sit* before a guru!”⁷² Yet in another setting,

⁷¹ It is notable, that the next two verses of Shankaracharya’s *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* (4,5) emphasize the importance and opportunity inherent in having a *male* human body. Verse 5 reads: “What greater fool is there than the man who having obtained a rare human body, and a masculine body too, neglects to achieve the real end of this life?” (Swāmī Mādhavānanda 2003: 3).

⁷² Melbourne, Florida Meditation Shivar 2008: 27 January 2008. Before this statement she berated the people “taking notes” (which included me), urging active listening instead.

Gurumaa calls would-be-disciples “apes” for their rote devotional stances. Once a young child around age four came to bow down before her in the ashram. Mildly amused by this display, she noted that children in India learn these habits early, that they imbibe them from their parents and thus even as adults, sometimes their devotion is merely “aping.” I determined that there must be a fine line in guru devotion between performing what is expected and acting out of sincere devotional impulse in the guru's presence.

Once living outside of the *gurukula* or ashram, dharma literature instructs, whenever the former student (now a householder) makes return visits to the guru, he should always come with a gift for the teacher, even if all he can afford are tooth-cleaning sticks (Olivelle 1999: 17). The practice of guru *dakshina*, making sacred offerings to the guru, continues today in numerous and varied forms—some very much resembling the ancient model (our shells perhaps) and some seeming remarkably new. The most common gifts devotees offer Gurumaa are gifts of money, fruit and flowers, but *guru-bhaktas* also offer gifts of time and energy to their teachers, especially in an age in which the guru's own projects become large philanthropic initiatives.

Giving (*dān*) and service (*sevā*) are devotional acts, and a devotee's compulsion to perform these comes ideally from within the heart and not from any outside insistence or from their own desire for recognition. Most disciples with whom I spoke felt compelled from within to give because of the immense gratitude they have towards their master. However, to ensure that devotees do not get caught up in their giving or develop ego (*ahamkāra*) from having given an appreciated gift, Gurumaa rarely acknowledges gifts, sometimes looking at them with a sense of disinterest or just

having them carried away while she sits before devotees offering to them her own “gift” of darshan. Disciples who brought gifts to Gurumaa were often anxious and excited to make these offerings. What we might think of as new or innovative offerings to gurus, such as service to and funding for the guru’s philanthropic projects, in the context of guru devotion, should be understood as current-day expressions of ancient practices. Disciples, who feel their karmic debts to Gurumaa can never be repaid, expressed to me their longing for “opportunities” to give something back to the guru. It is not uncommon to hear Gurumaa call for disciples’ efforts, saying, “You should give the *satguru* your body, mind, and wealth (*tan, man, and dhan*),” utilizing what Gold notes as a “stock phrase in the songs of the *sants*” (1987a: 24).

Such efforts in *sevā* and the offering of oneself, ideally, comes naturally, spontaneously (*sahaj*), and “from inside” a heart filled with gratitude for the lamplighter. However, Gurumaa explains that most people, even in religious settings, don’t know how to give. She offers a story from her early days spent singing in *gurdwaras*:

*A woman placed a ten-rupee note right on my lap so that I don’t miss it. I put it to the side. She came over and picked it up and put it back on my lap. I said, “Lady!” She said, “Please give me 8 rupees back.” I handed the note back to the lady, who then objected, “How dare you deny me the right to give?!”*⁷³

Next, Gurumaa offers the moral of the story: *The day you begin to receive you get so humbled down and you learn to give.* Ideally, giving, service as well as the discipline of the body and mind (*sādhana*), are understood as “opportunities” by seekers on the *guru-mārga*. Finishing her vignette on giving, Gurumaa explained: *When you get to give, that is*

⁷³ This italicized story comes from a talk given during Gurumaa’s March 2009 teaching tour. I am not certain of the exact date and place. The italicized words were taken from directly from my fieldnotes written during a showing of the DVD in the ashram.

the Devi living in your heart.

Like any ashram, Gurumaa Ashram provides daily opportunities for full time and part-time residents to serve. Indeed, an ashram exists on such service.⁷⁴ Householders also wish to offer their *sevā*, and look for opportunities to serve. Each week, one such opportunity arises for Gurumaa's householder devotees; groups coordinated by specific Gurumaa Meditation Centers located in Punjab, Delhi and Haryana arrive at the ashram on Saturday evening by bus to engage in a full day of intensive cleaning projects and other ashram upkeep on Sunday. The language of *sevā* as opportunity was something I heard frequently in the field.

Sectarian developments in Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Bhakti and Tantra streams often stress the guru's own lineage (*paramparā*). Some guru traditions, especially those of Vedantic, Shaiva and Tantric traditions, trace their lineage back to the "primordial guru" (*adiguru*), Lord Shiva himself, perhaps not so much to legitimate lineage, but as a way of expressing the divine origins of guruhood more generally (Gold 1987a: 196).⁷⁵ On the Vaishnava side of Hindu religiosity, solitary gurus from whom lineages have developed (teachers without living gurus of their own) sometimes have been identified by devotees as incarnations (*avatar*) of Vishnu. Prevalent medieval and modern examples of this are lineages in Gaudiya Vaishnavism and Swaminarayan Hinduism that look to founders Chaitanya (16th century Bengal) and Swami Narayan (19th century Gujarat) as *avatar-gurus*. Some gurus (female and male) have been understood to be *avatars* of the Great Goddess (*devi*), yet these have rarely left lineages. Contemporary devotees of the female guru, Mata Amritanandamayi from Kerala, regard her as a living

⁷⁴ The number of paid ashram employees in Gurumaa Ashram is quite small.

⁷⁵ Gold cites the *Kulārṇāva Tantra* as one source for the notion of Shiva as *adiguru*.

form of the *devi*. It remains to be seen what sort of *paramparā* may take shape after her death.⁷⁶

In Tantric literature, Shiva is the myth model guru and his consort Parvati, the model disciple.⁷⁷ Perhaps nowhere else is the guru-disciple relationship, or rather, *guru-bhakti* as a means or method for divine union – a yoga – so clearly mapped out as in the *Guru Gita*, a scripture about which Gurumaa has spent several weeks giving her commentary. Swami Muktananda, in his introduction to Siddha Yoga’s book of chants, identifies the *Guru Gita* as “the indispensable text” for himself and for his students, and prescribed that his householder and renunciant students, alike, chant it in full each morning before their meditation (SYDA 1984: xiv).⁷⁸ Swami Sivananda translated the text into English for his students, which established it as an integral scripture for the different lineages that formed after his death including his student Swami Satyananda Saraswati’s Bihar School of Yoga.⁷⁹ Not surprisingly, in regard to *guru-bhakti*, I find a good deal in common between these lineages and Gurumaa’s own circle of devotees in devotional and scriptural approaches. Each of these traditions, including Gurumaa’s, shows strong influence from Vedanta, Bhakti and Tantra streams of the Hindu tradition.

⁷⁶ The Mata Amritanandamayi Mission (MAM) initiates renunciants into the Saraswati *sannyās* order. The first of Mata Amritanandamayi’s devotees to take this initiation, however, took it not from her, but from a renunciant in the Ramakrishna Mission. This is because Mata Amritanandamayi, though a celibate renouncer, never took *sannyās* herself. For more information on Mata Amritanandamayi’s organization, see the work of Selva Raj (2004; 2005) and Maya Warriar (2005).

⁷⁷ In the larger corpus of Tantra, Shiva is the teacher and Parvati asks questions and listens (*āgamas*), but there are also texts in which Parvati gives the instruction (*nigamas*).

⁷⁸ Muktananda continues, stating that only a sage as great as Jnaneshwar, who could make a bull recite the *Vedas*, would have comprehension and competency to write about it (xv). Gurumaa also told the bull story to me in Maharashtra. Jnaneshwar who had been cast out of the Brahmin caste, proved his expertise nonetheless by making a bull recite the *Vedas*. A similar tale exists in Kabir’s hagiography as well, with similar intent to establish Kabir’s authority to teach religious knowledge despite his status as non-Brahmin.

⁷⁹ The Divine Life Society (DLS), established by Swami Sivananda, holds his “official” lineage in Rishikesh. However, students of Sivananda established a number of other lineages besides the DLS including the Bihar School of Yoga.

In 182 Sanskrit verses, the *Guru Gita*, one of many mythic conversations between Shiva and Parvati on Mount Kailash, explains the intricacies of guru-devotion, offering instruction for worship of the guru and description of its salvific fruits. In Gurumaa Ashram, the first song at morning *āratī*, as disciples ring in the new day, begins with one well-cited verse from the *Guru Gita* (89) “ I bow to the Sadguru, who is the bliss of Brahman and the bestower of the highest joy,” and ends with another (76): “The root of meditation is the Guru’s form. The root of worship is the Guru’s feet. The root of mantra is the Guru’s word. The root of liberation is the Guru’s grace” (SYDA 1984: 31; 28).

For the tradition of *guru-bhakti*, Shiva as the primordial guru and Parvati as his devotee, provide models “with form” (*saguṇ*). But Shiva’s “formless” (*nirguṇ*) aspects are quite relevant in each of these contemporary traditions mentioned above. *Āratī* at the end of each day in Gurumaa Ashram involves chanting along to Gurumaa’s studio-mixed recording of Adi Shankara’s “Song of the Soul” (*Ātmāshtakam*), with its well-repeated refrain, “I am Shiva” (*Shivoham*). Devotees walk along the ashram sidewalks heading back to their dormitories singing and humming *Shivoham Shivoham Shivoham Shivoham* to the catchy, upbeat tune of Gurumaa’s rendition. In the ashram’s small temple (*mandir*), Shiva’s large *mūrti* as God of Yoga (*yogeshwar*) sits front and center just below a life-sized painting of Gurumaa’s own guru, Sant Dalel Singh, with a smaller Durga seated on her tiger to the left. Whether Shiva is without qualities (*nirguṇ*) as in *Ātmāshtakam* or with qualities (*saguṇ*) as Yogeshwar, Shiva is the *adi-guru* – to whom devotees bow – manifest in the *form* of the human guru as well as *without form* in the devotee’s heart as the “inner guru.”

Potent Vaishnava models for guru devotion exist as well. Krishna, *avatar* of Vishnu, is “guru of the universe” (*jagadguru*) in his role as Arjuna’s charioteer in the *Bhagavad Gita*.⁸⁰ Arjuna, in the middle of his own personal and epic-level disaster, seeks refuge and guidance from his beloved friend and trusted driver, his “bosom buddy,” as Gurumaa puts it.⁸¹ As their conversation on the battlefield unfolds, Krishna reveals himself to Arjuna as Lord of the Universe. Therefore, it is through his bosom friend-cum-guru that Arjuna sees God. In Krishna’s more playful role in Vraj, on the bank of the Yamuna River, he sometimes teaches through word, but most famously, teaches through his presence and his participation in Vraj residents’ devotion to him. In the Vrindavan setting, the call of the divine comes in the form of Krishna’s flute. That attractive call and the gopis’ response to it provide a well-known model of divine attraction (*divya akāśān*) as a call and a response. In ashram literature, Gurumaa’s singing voice is portrayed similarly as a divine call of the Lord to devotees.

Shiva as *adiguru* and Krishna as *jagadguru*, provide obvious models of guruhood while their mythic conversation partners/consorts/devotees provide models for discipleship. Gurumaa also adds Lord Rama to the conversation on *guru-bhakti*. Gurumaa points out that despite the fact that Rama himself was divine he nonetheless took shelter from gurus and he was a model disciple. She refers primarily to Rama’s

⁸⁰ In this role, Krishna gives Gurumaa a rich storehouse for discourse. Her commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita* consists of hundreds of discourses, now for sale in a 71 DVD series, which have also been streamed in weekly segments at gurumaa.com free of charge.

⁸¹ This is Gurumaa’s language, a fine example of her clever and contemporary English touch within Hindi speech to give old stories new relevance. William K. Mahony has similarly called Krishna Arjuna’s BFF (Best Friend Forever), an acronym common in American elementary school parlance (Discourse, Abhaya Yoga studio, Brooklyn, NY, July 2009). Lama Marut (formerly Vedic scholar Brian K. Smith) has emphasized the aspect of Arjuna recognizing the guru in someone near and dear, a “boyhood chum,” utilizing this and other similar contemporary phrases in his yoga studio talks on the *Bhagavad Gita*. These scholar-yogis and Gurumaa do not point out something to which other commentators on the *Bhagavad Gita* have not already noted, that God appears sometimes in form that is “familiar,” but they do so in new, pertinent, linguistic registers.

conversation on Vedanta with his guru, Vashishta, in the scriptural source, the *Yoga Vashista*. Gautama Buddha too, though he never took one particular guru, Gurumaa points out, sat with and learned from many teachers during his lifetime as the Buddha. To qualify this she points out that in previous lifetimes, he had received the blessings of enlightened beings (Gurumaa 2011a: 215).

Individually, Gurumaa's devotees see her in numerous ways. Some attested that she was Krishna for them. For a time, there was a colorful picture of the modern calendar-art genre framed and kept in a little-seen area of the ashram kitchen, where it was used privately in devotional *pūjā*. In the portrait, Gurumaa's face had been "photo-shopped" onto Krishna's body, leaning against a tree in his familiar *tribunka* position, legs crossed to form a triangle, holding the flute.⁸² Others identified Gurumaa with Shiva or Durga. According to my Amritsar conversation partner, Prema,* Gurumaa's earliest and most ardent early devotee, Mohani* (also mother to Gurumaa's Right Hand Man), had never met Gurumaa, even though urged by her mother-in-law to do so. Instead, Mohani was immersed in Radha devotion that included her preparation of 36 dishes each day to offer Krishna's consort goddess. She begged for Radha's darshan, yearned for it, but had never received it despite her efforts. One day she sat to wait for Radha and Gurumaa's face appeared to her. Devotees relate to the guru according to their own dispositions and worldviews. Hearing this story, I recalled the devotee who announced with great enthusiasm, "When Gurumaa walks into a room, it's as if Guru

⁸² I was told the picture had been a gift from householder devotees. It immediately reminded me of old (non-photo-shopped) photographs of Anandamayi Ma (d. 1982), who at the behest of devotees, dressed like Krishna and posed in this way. Similar photographs exist of Meher Baba (d. 1969) and can be found on the Internet. Smriti Srinivas writes about an Atlanta devotee's Walmart photo-copied portrait of Sai Baba's face super-imposed onto Krishna, holding his flute, exemplifying how "other mundane technologies [besides the Internet] such as copy machines can also distribute magic" (Srinivas 2010: 321). Srinivas includes a copy of the photograph in her monograph.

Govind Singh himself has walked into the room.” Other Sikh devotees speculated to me that Gurumaa must be recipient of the loving guidance of Guru Nanak or Guru Govind Singh, or both, because she embodied their qualities for our current age.

The centuries long bhakti movement that began in the subcontinent’s southern region and slowly moved northward took shape in vernacular-language poetic verse, and it democratized religious teaching by expanding the audience of knowledge (*jñāna*). In 2009, I traveled to Nagpur, Maharashtra, a region rich with its own vernacular bhakti tradition, to watch Gurumaa's 5-day *Amrit Varsha* program. There, in a private sitting, Gurumaa explained to me the importance of sages like Maharashtrian Sant Jnaneshwar who offered once inaccessible teachings to common people through “hummable” verse in Marathi language. I quote her words at length:

Jnaneshwar was of this view that not everyone knows Sanskrit and the Brahmins had kind of made *Bhagavad Gita* too distanced, kept it far far away from the common man. How would a common man come to know what Krishna has said? At that time when Krishna spoke, Sanskrit was the language. He [Krishna] never meant to give a very scholarly outlook to his words or to show off his linguistic gifts. Sanskrit was the language which was used at *that* time, but now Sanskrit is not being used. Jnaneshwar translated all *Bhagavad Gita* in his *Jñāneshwari*, gave his own inputs in there for deeper *sādhana*, and made it singable, hummable. That’s how he propagated the message of *Bhagavad Gita* in a common man’s language. Many people say that the best commentary to the *Bhagavad Gita* was done by Jnaneshwar. That too in such a language that a farmer, a cobbler, person who is doing the menial jobs [could understand] – so he took away the superiority status of all Brahmins. In saying [to the Brahmins] “You are just being egoistic, foolish, being proud of your knowledge. Now I will disperse this knowledge to the common man in such a way that they won’t need you.”⁸³

⁸³ Gurumaa’s words come from my typed transcript of the recording of our private meeting in the home of her disciple-hosts in Nagpur, February 17, 2009. Leading into these words, Gurumaa had explained at some length a number of the legends associated with Jnaneshwar (including the famous story of Jnaneshwar forcing a bull to recite the Vedas to some uppity Brahmins) as well as her explanation of his own Brahmin heritage that was snatched away from him egoistic Brahmins. She also told the stories of female poet saints Muktabai and Janabai, one the diksha guru of Namdev and the other his beloved servant and disciple. She explained in colorful detail the devotion of Maharashtrians and their love of music.

Jnaneshwar's Marathi language *Jñāneshwari*, richly celebrated in his region and beyond, provides a 13th century CE example of one sage's commentary as well as translation of scripture into language accessible to his own audience. Gurumaa had Jnaneshwar and other Marathi poet *sants* (Janabai, Muktabai, Namdev) on her mind during our conversation in Nagpur. The *sants* who make the largest part of her repertoire of songs and stories, however, are the kindred souls from her part of the subcontinent, who wrote their verse (*bānī*) in Hindi and Punjabi in the centuries to follow.

Sants, Sufis, Sikhs and others

The guru had become a central figure and an indispensable part of one's path to liberation (*moksha*) after the rise of Vedantic, Yogic, Tantric and Bhakti movements, with the *guru-mārga* understood to serve a clear soteriological function in addition to a pedagogical one (Mahony 1997: 263). These traditions, subsumed in the broad and problematic category "Hindu," were not the only traditions in which the student-teacher relationship has been an integral component. The relationship has served an important function in nearly every religious tradition in India, including Christianity.⁸⁴ Some of Gurumaa's own stories of masters and disciples have included the Buddha and his close attendants, Sufi masters (*murshid*) and disciples (*murid*), as well as Jesus and his disciples.

⁸⁴ In her introduction to her study of Catholic gurus in India and their ashrams, Catherine Cornille engages in a useful, if somewhat inherently slippery, comparison of the master-disciple relationship cross-culturally and cross-religiously (1991). Though Thomas Thangaraj's topic is not that of Christian gurus, he nonetheless generates the framework for a Christology (theological exercise that determines the significance of "Jesus the Christ") that uses the Saiva Siddhanta understanding of "guru" to explicate the significance of Jesus (1994).

Gold describes the medieval Hindi *sant* tradition in north India as a syncretistic diffuse clan of holy men whose group cohesion came from shared repertoire of song and story rather than any formal allegiance. It is within this loosely linked tradition of synthetic origins, beginning with the “*adi-sant*,” 15th century Kabir, that we see *guru-bhakti*, as part of a personal devotional faith, come to fruition (Gold 1987a; Juergensmeyer 1991; Vaudeville 1987, 1997). Most importantly, it is to this tradition that Gurumaa pays homage when she sings the songs of the *sants* and tells their stories. Perhaps by virtue of her regional, linguistic heritage, the syncretistic medieval Hindi *sants* make up an integral piece of centuries old Indic “tradition” in Gurumaa’s eclectic “new age” canon, and therefore, it is among the *sants* where it makes the most sense to place this contemporary “revolutionary” female mystic. “Revolutionary,” a self-description she sometimes uses, characterizes the way in which she speaks her mind and remains steadfastly independent. Refusing to be placed in an “ism,” yet drawing from many, Gurumaa stands alongside *sants* like Kabir and Nanak, both of whom, she often points out, refused the prevalent labels of their day, Hindu and Musalman.

As noted earlier, female teacher-models in the religious worlds among which Gurumaa was raised are scarce. Sahajo Bai is perhaps the only female *sant*-guru of the north Indian tradition, at least the only one who left a corpus of songs along with her (albeit somewhat small) human legacy.⁸⁵ Gurumaa also shared with me stories of Janabai and Muktabai, female *sants* from a more southerly region. But in song and in *mūrti*, Sahajo Bai appears as the Hindi *sant* model of surrender in the guru-disciple relationship and her guru, Charandas, a model *satguru*. Charandas claimed 108 disciples, according to Gurumaa, all of whom attained greatness. Gurumaa states, “In my opinion,

⁸⁵ Gold discusses other students of Charandas who continued his legacy in Delhi as well (1987a).

after Buddha, it was only Charandas who had been fortunate to have so many deserving disciples. Kabir had only one disciple [one who attained his own state] and so did Guru Nanak.” (Gurumaa 2011a: 168).⁸⁶

Like the *sants* from Maharashtra and north India, Gurumaa too offers song for both devotional and didactic ends. Likewise, in following *sant* tradition, song appears to be a “dominant scriptural form” for Gurumaa, as Gold notes it being for the earlier *sants* (1987a). Not only does she sing songs of the *sants* in Hindi and Punjabi language, but also she has composed a voluminous corpus of original songs, many taking *guru-bhakti* as their theme while utilizing time honored melodies and common language of the *sant* tradition.⁸⁷ Gurumaa sometimes innovates in her musical offerings of past *sants*’ words, especially in her rendering of the *bānī* of the Sikh gurus, which she presents in her own creative, soulful and feminine devotional style, in *bhakti bhāva*, an immediate and powerful contrast to monotone re-presentations of the Sikh guru’s words performed in carefully prescribed ragas in gurdwaras. It is to this innovation that many of Gurumaa’s Sikh devotees attribute their own attraction to her, explaining that for them Gurumaa brought a tradition that had become rote ritual to new life. It was to

⁸⁶ I am not certain who Kabir’s “true disciple” was. Gurumaa tells the story of Nanak’s discernment of his one true disciple and I retell this story later in this chapter. Of the great many listeners and self-professed “disciples” (*shisya*) of Gurumaa, to this date, she does not yet claim any as a true “disciple,” meaning, that none have reached her state. In Gurumaa’s rendition of the story of Milarepa’s many trials at the hand of his master, Marpa, Milarepa underwent those trials because he knew for certain Marpa was his master, yet his dedication as student had to be proved through the testing. She concludes, “it is no big deal if you accept someone as your master—the million dollar question is whether the master accepts you” (Gurumaa 2011a: 195).

⁸⁷ Upon devotees’ requests, Gurumaa has also sung *bhajans* in Gujarati (and perhaps other languages). This is not uncommon for gurus today. Mata Amritanandamayi has sung *bhajans* in a number of languages including Western languages. The Satya Sai Baba community also has a large reserve of *bhajans* translated into various languages and with cultural adaptations such as the mixing of *Amazing Grace* into traditional Indian *bhajans*. American *bhakta* and *kīrtan-wallā*, Krishna Das, is known for making Indian devotional singing accessible to American yogis and yoginis. He has also put *Amazing Grace* into his Indian language *kīrtan* (Sanskrit and Hindi). In all of these cases, including Gurumaa’s, the guru (or *kīrtan-wallā*) caters to the audience’s needs.

her singing voice that many devotees felt their first and strongest attraction (*lāgau*). It is also by way of the guru's voice, as it is re-presented in various media, through which many stay connected to her.

Gurumaa demonstrates her strong affinity with the simple and understandable language of the north Indian *sants*, who appealed to people's hearts in the mother-tongue.⁸⁸ In the midst of a series of talks on the *Guru Gita*, in November 2009, Gurumaa began her discourse, not with Sanskrit verse (*śloka*) from that scripture itself, but with a devotional song (*bhajan*) composed closer to her listeners' own temporal setting by Charandas. She explains that Charandas sings about the same topic Shiva has sung to Parvati in the *Guru Gita*. She refers to the *śloka* she had given the day before (170) in which Shiva explains that the guru himself is mother, father and all relations. Charandas' song provides the bridge connecting the *śloka* of the previous day's discourse to this day's, during which she talks about the "unbounded" guru himself as one's religion (*Guru Gita*; verse 168). Through Charandas' "simple" (*sahaj*) language, and in his "great, juicy, sweet verse" (*baṛī, saras, madhūr bānī*) Gurumaa contends, Charandas has improved (*bahut sudhāran*) Shiva's words on the same topic.⁸⁹ Following Gurumaa's logic presented earlier, like Jnaneshwar who offered the *Bhagavad Gita* to his particular Marathi-speaking audience, the Hindi singing *sant*, Charandas, offers his own particular cultural and linguistic translation of a scripture from an earlier era—in a way he felt relevant to listeners in his own new setting.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Of course, she notes Kabir's upside down language when she talks about his verse as being difficult to comprehend. Her many talks given specifically on Kabir are not addressed here.

⁸⁹ ACD, *Guru Gita* discourse. 22 November, 2009. Volume 1.

⁹⁰ Charandas' *Bhaktisagara* is indeed a veritable "ocean" of Hindi devotion. For more on Charandas, see (Gold 1987: 67-84).

Charandas' own guru story, as told by Gurumaa, instructs in two important facets to the guru-disciple relationship, yearning (*viraha*) for the master and immersion in yogic disciplines (*sādhana*) as a way of staying connected to the master and proceeding on the path. Charandas met his master, Shukadev, Gurumaa explains, for only two and one half days during which time Shukadev imparted philosophical teachings (*jñāna*) and disciplinary practices (*sādhana*). Then Shukadev told Charandas to go off and practice this on his own for 12 years (Gurumaa 2011a: 170). During twelve years of intense *viraha*, or as Gurumaa aptly puts it, “pining day and night,” Charandas dove fully into the practices he received from his teacher: meditation (*dhyāna*), hatha yoga postures (*āsana*), mantra chanting (*japa*) and *jñāna* (2011a: 170). At the end of twelve years, Charandas set out in search of his master, looking for years more, having no idea where to find him. Finally together, Shukadev, joined in ecstatic union with his accomplished disciple, instructed Charandas, “spread the light of your wisdom by awakening those who are still asleep”(171).

Charandas' guru, according to Gold, was a person of mysterious historical origin. Gold's brief, nuanced discussion of Charandas' mysterious guru-disciple relationship carefully considers hagiographic and early scholarly sources, taking together the “ambiguous physical character of Shukdev and the concrete circumstances of the story of Charandas' initiation” (1987a: 71-73). Gold offers a “plausible” scenario that, “Charandas had a brief but crucial encounter with a living guru, whose name, perhaps, was something like Shukdev; as Charandas' perceptions changed, he began to understand his guru of the past as the legendary son of Vyasa.”⁹¹ Some hagiographical

⁹¹ Vyasa, ascribed author of several major Hindu scriptures, including the *Mahabharata*, and his fabled son, Shukdev, would have lived millennia before Charandas. In hagiographical traditions, Shukdev is one of those perfected sages (*siddhas*) thought to continue to roam the earth revealing themselves to

stories tell of visionary meetings between Charandas and legendary Shukadev, culminating in a final physical meeting. Certainly, it is not unheard of for gurus to take initiation from their masters in less conventional ways than direct living person to living person contact, such as from masters in their astral forms by way of dreams or visions. For purposes of comparison with Gurumaa, it is important that Charandas' guru, Shukadev, historical or not, was not a known figure to those students who would come to call Charandas their teacher. In other words, those attracted to Charandas had not been attracted by virtue of his lineage. Gurumaa's own unconventional initiation into *sannyās* came from a Nirmala *sant* not readily known to those in her growing audience at the time, and in whose lineage she does not stand today even though she honors her guru accordingly.⁹² Like the songs of Charandas, Gurumaa's songs in commonly used vernacular language articulate devotional sentiments of *guru-bhakti*, commonly expressed by the *sants* (and expressed by her own disciples to her) such as gratitude, reverence, longing, surrender and liberation. Serving devotional and didactic purposes, the songs both express and promote commonly held devotional stances (*bhāva*) of the devotee towards the Divine teacher (*Gurudev*), a Teacher both *nirguṇ* and *saguṇ*.

Contrary to the lack of guru-models for women, feminine devotee-models are not lacking in Indian spiritual traditions. The feminine devotional stance, often based on the *gopis* of Vrindavan, is one adopted by male devotees as well as female—a stance for which the male bhakti poet Surdas is well known. Though smaller in number, female poet-singers' voices figure prominently in the world of bhakti, Mirabai of Rajasthan

spiritually astute beings (Gold 1987: 71).

⁹² Gurumaa is likely not accepted into this lineage either. For more of the story of Gurumaa's own unconventional initiation into *sannyās* from her guru, Sant Dalel Singh, see Chapter 4.

standing perhaps most notably known among them, at least in north India.⁹³ If Mirabai can be seen as the ultimate historical female *Krishna-bhakta* (Radha being the ultimate mythic one), then Sahajo Bai might be understood as ultimate female *guru-bhakta*.

In the conversation that opened this chapter, Gurumaa points to Sahajo Bai, model of surrender (*samarpan*) in the guru-disciple relationship. She also introduced me to one of her favorite Sahajo Bai songs:

I might leave Rama, I could never forget my Guru.
In my eyes, Hari is not the equal of my Master.
Hari brought me into this world,
the Guru freed me from the cycle of birth and death....

Hari hid himself from me,
the Guru gave me a lamp and showed me God....

I offer my body and mind to Charandas,
I will never leave my Guru, I might leave Hari.⁹⁴

(SahajoBai 2001: 13)

Gurumaa paraphrased the song above for me in English prose, explaining some of the intricacies of Sahajo's devotion, quoted here, at length:⁹⁵

[Sahajo] said, God gave me these five senses, which made me afflicted to this world, but Guru, he cut out these ties and taught me the way to go in. Thus, I can leave God but I can never leave my Master. She says, God gave me cycle of life and death and my Guru broke this cycle with *jñān*, with true knowledge... Sahajo says, God gave me attachments but my Guru gave me the sword with which I severed all these attachments. The most beautiful words were when she said that God hid himself from us but Guru lit up lamp of *jñān* and showed me where God is. Thus Sahajo says, I can leave God but not Guru, because of the Guru, only, I came to know about God.... Sahajo says for me my Guru is the greatest, for me my Guru is my God, for me my Guru is my Beloved.⁹⁶

⁹³ Mirabai's lifetime is difficult to date. She is usually located in 16th century India.

⁹⁴ Rama and Hari are both names for God. They are Vaishnava flavored, yet in *sant* poetry, they usually indicate a formless Lord.

⁹⁵ I emphasize that she was speaking the verse to me in prose because Gurumaa does sing Sahajo Bai's songs in Hindi language. I have yet to find a recording of her singing this song, however.

⁹⁶ Darshan discourse transcript: 13 February 2008. Gurumaa Ashram. Gannaur, Haryana. Gurumaa has also spoken similar words about Sahajo Bai in response to the question asked by a disciple identified on the website as Anil, "Is a guru greater than God?" See <http://www.gurumaa.com/spiritual-question->

Gurumaa further explained that Sahajo was “in great love with her guru.” Sahajo’s story of first attraction to Charandas contains its own mysterious aspects and is one in which divine intervention takes place in the form of Sahajo’s groom falling to his death during the wedding ceremony, freeing her to live instead among sadhus as *guru-bhakta*. Charandas, a member of her own biological clan, visited Rajasthan for Sahajo’s wedding. Upon seeing the bride in her wedding finery, he offered words that questioned her motives for marriage and reminded her of death’s inevitability (Gold 1987a: 81). Immediately, she recognized her calling, but the bridegroom was already on his way to her home. During the procession, a firecracker startled the groom’s horse causing the horse to trip and fall, killing the groom, and at once Sahajo was freed from her feminine duties of devoted service to husband and family (*strīdharmā*) for a life devoted to the Spirit. Her own father offered her to Charandas and became a disciple himself.⁹⁷

Divine Attraction

Words and the attractive force of wisdom

Of course many of Gurumaa’s listeners are attracted to her for the reason that students are always drawn to teachers, for the purpose of receiving *jñāna*. Even in Sahajo’s own somewhat miraculous meeting with Charandas, it is his words uttered that drew her to the life of spiritual seeking:

[answers/guru-god-greater.html](#) .

⁹⁷ Aveling and Joshi tell this story as well, following Gold (Aveling and Joshi 2001: xiv). Gurumaa did not tell me this wedding story. She does, however, tell a similar wedding attraction story. Rajjab disciple of the well-known Dadudayal, was in the middle of his own wedding when his guru questioned his motives and urged him to take the fast track (in this lifetime) instead of leading the life of attachment as householder. Gurumaa points out that Rajjab’s marriage was a “love marriage” no less, but that his guru appealed to him with the question “What was the purpose of this birth?” (Gurumaa 2011a: 183-189).

Sahajo, why beautify your face
For just a moment's married bliss;
Death will come, you won't remain—
Everyone departs. (Gold 1987a: 80).⁹⁸

Most students with whom I spoke were attracted to the message Gurumaa conveys or for the Truth (*satya*) they recognized in her words, which for many is Gurumaa's near constant reminding of the inevitability of death—apparent not only in Charandas' words to Sahajo at her wedding, but expressed profusely in the songs of the *sants* and Sikh gurus. Many of Gurumaa's students were drawn to her song itself (or her melodious voice). Many other students were attracted to the “all-in-one” package, the fact that she offered so much: song, entertaining discourse, powerful words. And some expressed their experience of her radiant beauty as an attractive power. Most devotees understand her beauty as the manifestation of divine love in and through her being, which then emits or radiates outward, to the outer world and to those around her.⁹⁹

Gurumaa's students put great value on the learning they receive from her, and for some, especially her younger listeners, she is the primary source of all their received religious and spiritual information. She is their giver of *jñāna*. Many of her *Amrit Varsha* programs have no specific advertised agenda, and in content they often span the vast terrain of religious worlds of India and beyond. On special occasions, Gurumaa has offered *pravacan* on particular scriptures, sages or thematic subjects. In

⁹⁸ This is Daniel Gold's translation, also quoted in Aveling and Joshi (2001: xiv). Aveling and Joshi also speculate about Charandas' charisma as an attractive power, that as a young yogi immersed in *tapas* he would have “no doubt... made a striking figure” (xiv).

⁹⁹ I attended one of Mata Amritanandamayi's *Devi Bhava Darshan* meetings in which she dresses as and manifests the Devi at a scheduled time for her devotees (something she did spontaneously as a young woman). I was advised to sit as close as possible to Amma (also called Mata) so that I would be able to receive the *shakti* she emits. The notion that a sage is a vessel of divine love or power and whose bounty overflows onto others is common. Swami Muktananda describes one who has realized the Self: “The radiant sun of the Self blazes in his eyes. Its flame radiates through every pore of his body. As if flashes, his entire body is filled with the nectar of love. Drops of nectar from the stream of love flow from his eyes. His words shower love” (quoted in Mahony 1997:227).

addition to those mentioned above, Gurumaa has given series of talks about Adi-Shankara, Kabir, Bulleh Shah, and others, taking the songs, teachings and life stories of these figures as her entry point and focus (while just about anything could get mixed in). The Sikh gurus enter nearly every conversation, including Gurumaa's talks on the *Guru Gita*. In the same talk in which Gurumaa begins with Charandas, she adds Sikh gurus Amar Das and Ram Das to the conversation, bringing stories from Goindval to accentuate elements of the conversation on Mount Kailash. Thematic talks draw particular crowds attracted to particular traditions, but Gurumaa keeps the conversation open by including non-traditional conversation partners. For many Sikhs, Gurumaa's extensive talks on Nanak's *Japji Sahib*, have served as an important entry point into this female guru's own unbounded world of bhakti.¹⁰⁰ Gurumaa's engagement with Rumi, and her published translations of 100 of his verses into Hindi was indeed an act of introduction for a great number of her listeners, adding Rumi to the conversation on devotional love and the master-disciple relationship.¹⁰¹

Like Charandas' "simple" words, Gurumaa offers her discourse and song in simple, clear, and easy to understand modern language. Once I asked why she speaks in Hindi, even while teaching in her home state of Punjab. She responded that Punjabis can understand Hindi, and, she will reach more people with Hindi language (all public talks are recorded and broadcast later). Disciples' words and stories about Gurumaa's teaching echo those of Sahajo Bai who sang: "Walk each day on the path of the guru's words, / What need will you have then for the Vedas and the Puranas?"

¹⁰⁰ The list of thematic talks as well as Gurumaa's many conversation partners goes on. One such expanded series of talks focused on Sufism and was offered at a camp (*shivir*) held in the ashram, called *Sufi Shivir*.

¹⁰¹ There is not space in this study to explore fully Gurumaa's engagement with Rumi, but I offer a bit more in Chapter 4. Gurumaa's internally published material claims her translations of Rumi's verse into Hindi to be "the first" Hindi translation. I cannot verify or deny the claim.

(Sahajobai 2001: 37). Like Charandas, and other *sant* forebears, Gurumaa teaches the “essence” of the scriptures with a strong intention of maximum audience comprehension, something she expressed to me directly on more than one occasion.¹⁰² Sant Charandas’ act of making Truth accessible was a transparent intention as well. He sang: “In making *The Material of Bhakti* / I present the Vedas’ witness. / Merge now with their secrets, / Which Charandas will tell in common language.” (Gold 1987a: 76). Not only is speaking in common language Gurumaa’s intent, but also, her disciples widely acknowledged appreciation for their easy comprehension of her talks, regularly repeating this sentiment expressed by a reflexologist in Nagpur: “She speaks to all of us in a way we can understand in our modern world.”

In addition to clear language, many students who listened regularly to Gurumaa explained to me that they appreciated her “bold” speech, issued forth without fear of censure, characterized to me by one young married couple in Delhi as *bindās bolna*. An Indian American yoga teacher visiting Gurumaa Ashram from Virginia, an avid listener of Gurumaa and another TV guru, Swami Ram Dev, expressed it this way: “You know why I like her? Gurumaa says it like it is. India really needs that.” Gurumaa consistently says what she wants to say and says it how she wants to say it—in a way that will most likely hit home for her listeners. One of the small but growing demographic of listeners not of Indian origin, Tom,* traveled to the ashram from Washington, DC for a retreat conducted mainly in English.¹⁰³ When Gurumaa had been in Washington, DC the year

¹⁰² Once I was surprised to hear Gurumaa speak differently. She was at the *Global Peace Initiative for Women* (GPIW, a UN Summit group meeting) in Jaipur. In a public conversation in English with Vedanta guru, Swami Dayananda, she raised the philosophical level of her speech to match that of her conversation partner, preaching in English with far more Sanskrit than was typical. The mediator and disciple of Dayananda, David Frawley, applauded her *jñāna*, something her students loved hearing. Afterwards they scheduled an interview with Frawley for *Soul Curry* magazine (that never made it into the magazine).

¹⁰³ Tom was one of a very small handful of Euro and African Americans who attended. 99% were Indian American participants.

before, she had offered words in a public discourse that Tom took as his personal empowerment mantra during a time when he was facing life's troubles: "So What?!" During the several months he had waited to see Gurumaa again, these words rang in his ears in the way that she had expressed them. "If I lose everything and I become homeless... So what?!" Her words had reminded him of the futility in placing great importance on possessions and financial resources at a time when his attachments to these were being severed by divorce. For a Mumbai resident, now retired from a business career, Gurumaa's words "How long will you run?" stayed with him and compelled him into a deep spiritual journey, with her as his master.

Even a casual listener of Gurumaa's discourse will be readily exposed to two potentially thorny topics: the immanency of death, and unfair treatment of women and girl children. The second of these is discussed in Chapter 5. The first of these topics, death, is well covered in the *sant* tradition, beginning with Kabir. But this has been a topic in scriptural conversations from ancient times as well. One obvious example can be found in philosophical conversations taking place in the *Upanishads*, in which death, personified as Yama, functions as teacher. Gurumaa explained to her listeners at the meditation retreat in Florida, "Our sages understood humans' denial of death to be a disease, even giving it a name, *jīveshna*." Gurumaa repeatedly offers her listeners the hard truth that "you can die in any moment" and to emphasize this, sings songs of *sants* like Kabir and Ravidas and Sufis like Baba Sheik Farid to stress not only death's inevitability and the futility of our worldly accumulations and attachments, but also to emphasize the miracle of a human birth. On the day devotees filled the ashram to celebrate the birth of Ravidas, Gurumaa began her talk with Ravidas' song famous

among Hindus and Sikhs alike, “Oh mortal, what is mine and what is yours?” (*prānī kya mera, kya tera?*). However, Gurumaa sang it differently from the way one hears it sung in gurdwaras (this song is *bhagat bānī* in the *Adi-Granth*), in such a haunting way that even an amateur in the language like me could understand the song’s intent as potent reminder that death is ever-present and that all attachments to body, wealth and family dissolve when the body turns to ash.

It is through music that Gurumaa communicates a great deal of her teaching. In her mini-lecture to me about Maharashtrian *sants*, their *bhakti* and their music, I asked Gurumaa to clarify for me the difference between *kīrtan* and *bhajan*. She noted that in *kīrtan* (distinguishing it from *bhajan*) there is singing back from the audience, a call and response. I then asked a leading question, “So your compositions are mostly bhajans?” I quote her response in full:

It’s a combination. Combination. [*pause*]

Kīrtan is more friendly to the listener because of the *tāl* and the rhythm and the pulse gets imprinted in them and invokes a nice beautiful mind. The mind can be easily calmed. It can be prepared for the conversation which I am going to have with them. As such, mind is in a very bad shape. Whole day you have gone through so many emotions and interactions while working with people. You see, all that dust is cleared with the *kīrtan*. Then, that is how I work, once I have brought them to that right state of mind, then I go into the *bhajan* or talking to them about what they need to understand. Music notes work wonderfully to tune the mind. Mind has to be tuned first. So many botherations, frustrations. You’re unhappy for something, you’re upset for something, you’re depressed or sad for something, there is something in the mind. Music, *kīrtan*, relieves you from all this garbage. Gets you refreshed like new.

In the same meditation retreat Tom attended, for seekers from the US (informally called the *NRI Shivir*), Gurumaa expressed the power of words, especially words sung beautifully, and to illustrate this, shared a story of Guru Nanak who once slept in a hut with a leper and healed that leper with his chanting. Indeed, the combination of song

and teaching (filled of course with story) has proved to be an attractive force in Gurumaa's career. Her own words have been so profuse, that, according to her Right Hand Man, in nearly a decade of offering TV *pravacan*, never once has any discourse been repeated on TV. I asked for the sake of clarification, "No re-runs?" Absolutely not (*bilkul nahīn*), he declared.

One of Gurumaa's disciples instrumental to the expansion of her early listening audience, particularly in Ludhiana and in other Punjab cities, I call Sanjay.* Sanjay was inspired to share Gurumaa's teachings with the larger world because of what he experienced as the magnetic power of her voice, the words and song that first drew him to her. Never having heard of or seen Gurumaa, Sanjay acquired an audiocassette recording.¹⁰⁴ He became obsessed with finding this female teacher whom he could identify only by voice. The voice stayed with him, Sanjay explained. After some time, he was in Amritsar to attend an event at which many saints offered discourse. Just as he was leaving the program, he heard that *voice*, and ran back. That was the beginning of his love relationship, he explained. The voice of the Self took form for him in the voice of the human guru, now identifiable by name and face. Sanjay explained that the attraction (*lāgau*) he felt toward Gurumaa was a divine attraction. His story, like many others, has an element of Mystery. "Guru found me in 1992," Sanjay insists, "I have done nothing to meet Gurumaa. It is blessing of God. When God is happy with you, then God sends a saint into your life to help you with changes." Sanjay echoes a well-known saying in the world of *guru-bhakti*: "When the disciple is ready, the guru appears."

¹⁰⁴ At that time Gurumaa's first disciple had been distributing Gurumaa's teachings through various networks of seekers and friends more informally than he does today with his cadre of helpers.

The Guru's Call of Love

The power (*shakti*) in the archetypal teacher-student relationship remains relevant, potent and dynamic in the context of our current, “new” age. I saw this perhaps best emphasized in devotees’ stories about their attractions to their guru. For many seekers, as for Sanjay, the attraction (*akārśan*) was divinely fated (*divya*), therefore, a divine attraction (*divya akārśan*). Devotees’ stories about their discovery of, first meeting and continued connection with the guru often held a sense of mystery (*rahasya*). On the path of bhakti, a common metaphor for a call such as that heard by Sanjay is likened to that of the Divine Beloved calling the lover, as Krishna called and the gopis responded. Prema, a primary source for many stories of Gurumaa’s early life and mission, shared a story of an Amritsar doctor who fled his dinner upon hearing Gurumaa’s voice for the first time. Hearing a voice “like no other” in the distance, he fumbled an excuse to his family about having forgotten something at the office, and quickly ran off in the direction of Gurumaa’s song that was being projected by loudspeaker from a nearby *gurdwara*. Ashram literature, including the website, depicts Gurumaa’s voice as a divine call, but the image of the doctor dropping his dinner at the voice’s beckoning, made the comparison to Krishna stories in the *Bhagavata Purana* crystal clear. In this sacred text, upon hearing Krishna’s call of the flute, in response, the gopis in Vrindavan left any and all engagements, even those with the babies at their breasts, to run to the bank of the Yamuna River.

Regardless of what draws disciples to Gurumaa Ashram – particular physical attributes, wisdom expressed, or state exuded – the attractive power or force drawing them is often perceived as a “call.” The call, understood as a call from the divine

Beloved, comes through the agency of the human guru. As I mentioned in the introduction, Gurumaa’s devotees also understood my entry into the ashram – as researcher – as a response to such a call. Ashram literature represents this idea clearly:

The Master is the magnetic pull that attracts seekers from all over. When this call of love is made, its strength is such that one cannot miss it, but only truly fortunate ones can hear this call. Gurumaa Ashram is one such place where this magic is unfolding. (Gurumaa 2010a: 251).¹⁰⁵

Disciples often referred to their attraction to Gurumaa as just such a magnetic pull. Because it is a *divya akārśan*, this force is understood not only to be pulling them towards her physical presence but also towards her state of divine union.

Gurumaa’s devotional song and lively discourse, filled with humor about contemporary life, attracted the vast majority of seekers I met in her circle. Many attest also to her beauty as an attractive force. In response to the comments she receives about her physical attractiveness, Gurumaa says, “When you grow in [divine] Love, you get beautiful.” Therefore, the attractive power, according to Gurumaa, is not necessarily her physical form itself, though that is indeed part of it, but rather, her interior state, reflected through her beauty as well as manifest through her voice. Indeed, voice (also sound or utterance as represented in scriptural sources as *vāc* or *shabd*) throughout Indian spiritual traditions represents a powerful manifestation of divine energy.

Sometimes a disciple is “ready” because of a good old-fashioned disaster or from the sorrows (*dukh*) that come with life. Krishna was Arjuna’s best friend, and in Arjuna’s darkest moment, in his life’s biggest disaster, he beseeches Krishna as guru, begging for help, he surrenders and takes refuge in another, only after which Krishna reveals himself as God. Disaster is one of the major prompts into a spiritual search and a

¹⁰⁵ These words come from the back matter appearing at the end of a number of Gurumaa’s publications.

spiritual life, and some devotees shared with me stories of the personal *dukh* that led them to Gurumaa.

Even when a veritable life crisis initially drew a disciple to Gurumaa, or to the spiritual journey itself, devotees' stories still often expressed an element of *rahasya*. The *Bhagavad Gita*, Gurumaa explained to me in an ashram darshan session, shows us that “disaster” can be an entry point. For without the disaster before him at Kurukshetra, without his own trembling and fear and dissonance felt at the battlefield where he had relatives and teachers on the other side, she explained, he would never have been able to see Krishna for who he truly was. In this understanding, it is in our very crying out in sorrow, that we open our eyes and become able to recognize God; without such a disaster, most humans will blindly continue life “asleep,” deluded by illusion (*māyā*), and thus remain “lost in” or “bound to” the world of duality and continual rebirth (*saṃsāra*).

A number of seekers described the magnetic pull towards Gurumaa to have occurred at a time when all appeared to be right in their lives; life was moving along normally and they were unconscious of the fact that they were seeking. One seeker articulated it to me in this way: “I feel as if I was not seeking, but rather, that I was being sought.” In the context of *guru-bhakti*, such a seeker who is capable of hearing the call, coming to the understanding that she is being sought, or rather, called toward the divine (through whatever agency) is understood to be a fortunate one, one whose destiny or karma, rather, merits an encounter with the divine teacher—Gurudev.

A prevalent perception underlies answers that seekers within Gurumaa's fold gave to my questions regarding their “attractions:” students will hear and be drawn to

the call when that call is issued by the teacher meant for them. Their meeting is thus, according to this understanding, no accident. Their attractions hold a sense of destiny, whether those attractions came via television watching, radio listening, active yearning and searching for a true teacher or by way of happenstance physical encounters. Regardless of the particularities of peoples' attractions to the guru, those on the *guru-mārga*, generally, held strongly the notion that without the karma to meet one's Gurudev, such a meeting will not happen in this lifetime.¹⁰⁶

I met a few (non-Indian) European seekers in Gurumaa Ashram. One European woman explained that she did not understand why she had been attracted to Gurumaa. Hers, she said, was not like the attractions she observed many Indian devotees feeling. She did not understand her attraction as mysterious at all. She had met Gurumaa at a spiritual community center in Scandinavia earlier in the year and felt drawn to her teachings. She had plans to tour India with a male companion after a short visit in the ashram. Upon their arrival, Gurumaa asked her (paraphrasing this seeker's words): *Why are you really here? Ask yourself that. Are you here to explore India or are you here for the interior journey? If you are here for the latter, then why become a tourist?* The two European seekers remained in the ashram until the day before their departure from India a month later. Though she did not know exactly why she was there, she completely changed her itinerary to stay. Though she expressed her understanding that Westerners may not experience the same level of mysterious attraction to their

¹⁰⁶ This view held true for stories of repulsion as well. Devotees understood those not attracted to a guru as not yet having accrued the karmic merit for meeting a satguru. Those not attracted, turned off by, or even those rejected or cast out from the Buddhafield by Gurumaa were understood not to have the karma for being there. Taking this a step further, the guru herself does not wish to teach such people, for an "enlightened" guru would never interfere with karma. Gurumaa explained to me that when someone totally devoted to her – even someone living close to her inside the ashram – decides to run away, she always allows them to go because she does not mess with karma.

teachers that Indians seemed to, at the same time, she left an opening for something more in her willingness to not fully understand.

Interestingly, one of the more mysterious attraction stories comes from another European seeker. Like the woman above, this man too had spent much time in spiritual communities in Europe. A writer on spirituality, he had been on the inner journey for nearly all of his lifetime. “She came to me in a vision,” he answered my question about his initial attraction to Gurumaa. While there may be some truth to the fact that Indians are more at ease with the “guru principal” or more inclined through cultural conditioning to observe the mystery in their encounters with holy persons, this seeker’s understanding of his call to Gurumaa Ashram indicated something more universal in divine call and response. He explained that he has been empathic from childhood, and that in recent years he had received impressions and intuitions coming from a particular source. As these impressions became clearer, he heard the word “gurumaa.” Not understanding, he searched the word on the Internet and there popped up Anandmurti Gurumaa. He knew immediately, he added, that this mystic master had been the one from whom he had received the vision. This seeker felt called to a teacher, in a somewhat “traditional” way, even though he engaged new methods of seeking.

Chotu,* from Mumbai, laughed at me when I asked him about his attraction to Gurumaa, one morning after breakfast in the ashram. He had already laughed at me for attempting to write a PhD thesis on a topic (his guru) that could never be expressed in words. In laughter, he asked me, “How can you explain a fragrance? To experience her is something, but to describe her is impossible. It’s like trying to fill a small glass with all the water in the world. How much of that water can you capture?” My pursuit of his

story of initial attraction, then, an aspect of his guru-disciple relationship holding, for him, much *rahasya*, again set off his laughter. Interestingly, his story of happenstance, seemed far less mysterious than other stories mentioned. But he explained to me, like so many others did in the course of my fieldwork, that many factors had to fall into place for him to meet his *satguru*. First, he overheard her voice when elders in his home were watching her on the TV; though he never has time for TV, he explained, for some odd reason, he felt compelled, then sat and listened a while. Next, two days later, he saw Gurumaa's photograph in the newspaper. He never reads the paper he explained; he just happened to pick it up that day and saw her photograph with an announcement that she was currently teaching in Mumbai. He wanted to attend her *Amrit Varsha* program the following day, but there had been a fire in his warehouse and he had to meet the fire inspector at the time of her *satsang*. After a full night of contemplation about the direction of his life, he skipped his morning meeting with the fire inspector, deciding that he no longer cared about anything besides getting to the *satsang*. The mystery for Chotu, lies in the multiple, small (*chote chote*), if ordinary, details of life—in the assortment of vectors that came together so that he could hear about Gurumaa for the very first time, then see the ad, and then meet her, all within a period of three days.

I met a number of seekers in Gurumaa's fold who had listened to and met many gurus before recognizing her as their *satguru*, meaning that she was not only a true, right or real (*sat*) guru to them, in general terms, but also that she is their own true guru, understood as the perfect match for them. For some people Gurumaa was the "right" guru for them because she lived close enough that they could visit her ashram, for even more, she was right for them because she speaks in clear and simple language,

without reservation or fear of censure. For most of these disciples, finding one's *satguru* also implied finding that teacher with whom a karmic connection exists.¹⁰⁷ For some, this discrimination occurred through a process of listening and adopting Gurumaa's teachings, then finding those words useful and productive in their own lives, a fairly active process. But for a number of seekers with whom I spoke, this process of coming together with the teacher felt to them somehow more passive; it was a relationship into which they felt "drawn" or "called" rather than one they actively sought. In other words, like Sanjay, they felt "found."¹⁰⁸ Gurumaa herself seems to have felt this way, which she expresses through song, "To You Gurudev" (*gurudev tumhārī*):

For a long time I had searched
 But the Guru found me by himself
 Take me in your service, Lord
 Glory to you, Gurudev!¹⁰⁹

A female ashramite in her late thirties, Aparna,* had been living in the Buddhafield for nearly a decade. Her first meeting with Gurumaa might be best characterized, as it is for many devotees, as love at first sight. Indeed, like Sahajo, this devotee, in a sense, was swept off her feet. Before meeting Gurumaa, Aparna had not even been aware she was on a spiritual search. She attended *Amrit Varsha* in her hometown at the insistence of others. Somehow, during, after and in between discourses over the course of four days, Aparna found herself continually crying. Her

¹⁰⁷ For some of the most fascinating tales of karmic connections between students and teachers, examine the stories of the *siddhas*, particularly the lineage important to the Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhist tradition of Tilopa, Marpa, Milarepa. Karmic connections between teachers and students are also prevalent in Indian Sufism and the Sikh religious tradition. See also Daniel Gold's chapter 7 (1987a), "The Indian Master in Greater Religious Contexts."

¹⁰⁸ Gilbert too had this experience with her guru. She writes: "Anyhow, it's not like I consciously went shopping for a Guru. She just arrived." Gilbert's guru, obviously a female, is not Anandmurti Gurumaa.

¹⁰⁹ Translated lyrics in transliterated Hindi: *Muddat se thī talāsh mujhe / guru mil gaye āp se āp mujhe / sevā mein laḡā lo nāth mujhe / Gurudev tumhārī jai hove.*

tears were not from despair she explained; everything in her life was proceeding as planned—there were no sufferings (*koi taklīf nahīn*). She had multiple post graduate degrees and a good teaching position. She was earning a salary and her family was looking for a suitable life partner for her. Yet, she found herself crying non-stop from the moment she heard the first words from Gurumaa. Somehow it worked out that she was able to meet Gurumaa in a semi-private setting prior to the last day’s discourse, so she asked Gurumaa about her tears that would not stop. Aparna explained that Gurumaa looked at her with the most compassionate eyes she had ever seen, and said, “This is just love, dear one” (*Yeh to prem hai, beṭā*).¹¹⁰ Gurumaa had awakened love in Aparna, and her life began to change its course. In less than two years Aparna left her job, her prospects for marriage and her life of comfort to move into the ashram. She once asked me rhetorically, *How could I possibly marry when I am in love with Gurumaa?*—a sentiment expressed to me by other ashramites as well, both male and female.

Attractions were many. Some happened instantly, and were described comparably to stories of love at first sight like those of Aparna, Sanjay and the Amritsar doctor. Others happened less dramatically, yet devotees retold their stories highlighting all of the small details that had to come together for their meeting. Others felt they had survived life’s sufferings because of their guru’s loving guidance offered at the perfect moment. Geeta, who had engaged in a self-conscious search for her *satguru* felt that each master she met along the way led her serendipitously to the next, until she found Gurumaa to be her Gurudev, not just her Divine Teacher, but also her divinely *given* teacher. For others, the attraction and bond with Gurumaa formed over the course of

¹¹⁰ In Hindi and in Punjabi, *beṭā* literally means “son” (feminine, *beṭī*) but it is typically used as a pet name for both sons and daughters. I translate it here as “dear one” because it is nearly always used in this way as a term of deep affection.

time, as often seemed to be the case with spouses slowly exposed to their life partner's Teacher. In understanding oneself as "sought" or as "found," there is a sense of surrender to a higher power, or at least, surrender to the understanding that the goal cannot be reached alone, that refuge must be taken. The search ends when the seeker is found. The guru's form, like the *voice* itself, is understood as an expression of divine love—there to attract and to inspire those who were sleeping to wake up and take the journey.

In relationship with the guru

Guru is mother, father, all relations...

Before Gurumaa begins her "conversation" on the *Guru Gita*, she introduces Charandas, and readies her audience with Charandas' bhajan, "Without the Guru I am nothing" (*guru bina mere aur na khoy*) beginning with these words:

Guru himself is mother, father and brother too
Guru himself is my wealth, body and soul.
Guru himself is caste, clan, kin group and all relations.¹¹¹

In the bond of love with the guru, the seeker, as *bhakta*, begins to see all aspects of life through that bond. In this bond, ideally, unhealthy attachments in relationships as well as attachments with which one falsely identifies drop away. This does not mean that the relationship to the guru takes the place of those other relationships. A married couple from Delhi (in their early 30s) experienced not dissolution of their relationship after the bond of love was formed with the guru, they explained to me, but rather, more love in their relationship with each other as well as in relationships with their children and

¹¹¹ *Guru Gita* DVD. 11 November, 2009: vol. I. Translated lyrics: *guru hi māta pitā aru bīr / guru hi sampati jīv sharīr / guru hi jāti varan kul got*. This song can be found in Hindi in: Caraṇadāsa. 1981. *Śrī Bhaktisāgara: pariśiṣṭa bhāga sahita*. Jayapura: Śrī Śuka Caraṇadāsīya Sāhitya Prakāśaka Ṭraṣṭa, p. 376.

other family members in the joint-household. What falls away when the guru himself – or herself in this case – becomes all of one’s relations, one’s kin and caste group, one’s religion, and one’s nationality, are one’s false identifications of the Self in these relationships. Only the guru, and the state the guru represents, is Real. Therefore, the guru himself is even my life force (*prān*), explains Gurumaa in her *Guru Gita* talk.

This notion, espoused by Charandas, also repeated multiple times in the *Guru Gita* (Gurumaa explains that Shiva sometimes repeats himself three times to be clear) can be understood in various ways. Another way to understand the guru as mother, father, brother, friend and all relations may be seen in the devotee’s seeking to understand the relationship with the human guru through her own experiences in these other human to human relationships. Because human minds are “conditioned,” devotees relate to the guru through various known emotions and thereby think of the guru in a variety of ways depending on many particularities between guru and disciple. Therefore, the most effective way to see the guru for one disciple may be to see the guru like a mother, father, sister, brother, friend, Divine Beloved, similarly to the way that Krishna devotees relate to their Lord as lover, friend, or child.

Guru as Beloved, Guru as God

Echoing sentiments also expressed by the *sants*, Gurumaa sings to the guru in her own words about the powerful bond of love between the guru and disciple in her verse, “The guru’s grace stands alone,” (*guru kī kripā hai nirālī*):

Tied in such a bond of love, all other binds to the world break.
We worship this love of yours, we worship this love of yours.¹¹²

¹¹² Translated lyrics: *Bāndhe prem kā aisa bandhan, tūte jag ke nāte / Ham tere prem pujārī, ham tere prem pujārī.*

In some cases all other ties to the world do break and disciples come to live full time in the ashram of their guru.¹¹³ Sahajo Bai, we recall, as bride-to-be left her birthplace in Rajasthan to live the life of *satsang* among sadhus in the ashram of her guru Charandas.

Tom from DC, drawn to Gurumaa Ashram by the mantra, “So What?!” has a different Gurudev. He spoke with me about his “heart-connection” to his guru, Karunamayi Ma from south India. Utilizing the language of the lover speaking of the beloved, in contemporary English he referred to Karunamayi as his “sweetheart” and told me the story of when he “popped the question” – the question being: “Will you be my guru?” When it comes to explaining the love and longing a disciple feels for one’s spiritual master, Gurumaa looks also to songs and stories of the Sufis. Devotees who relate to Gurumaa in much the same way that Tom relates to his beloved guru also find ready conversation partners in the likes of Sultan Bahu and Bulleh Shah. When Gurumaa uses the language of sowing the seeds of love in the hearts of her listeners, she echoes not only *sants* and Sikh gurus, but also the sentiments of Sultan Bahu, 17th century Sufi from Punjab:

My master planted jasmine in my heart.
“No” and “Yes” watered the plant,¹¹⁴
Soaking it through and through.
It blossomed, its fragrance filled my heart.
May he live long, Bahu—
My perfect master, who planted this flower. (Mir 521-22).¹¹⁵

Devotees who felt swept off their feet, experienced sentiments similar not only to those expressed by gopis entranced by the call of the beloved, but also those experienced by

¹¹³ It is worth noting that ashramites do not renounce ties to the world and to family as do those who take formal vows of *sannyās*. Gurumaa does not advocate taking such vows. There is quite a range in ashramites’ degrees of world-renunciation. Some ashramites do leave their known world entirely and others continue to go “outside” to visit family and friends, though on rare occasion.

¹¹⁴ Here “no” and “yes” refer to the negation and affirmation in Muslim creed, “There is no God but God.”

¹¹⁵ See also Jamal J. Elias (1998: 37) for another translation of this song. Gurumaa sings a longer version of it (perhaps multiple *kalams* sung together) on her studio-recorded album, *Shoonya*.

Bahu, who sang:

Love saw me weak and it launched a raid.
Everywhere I look I see love, there is no empty space.
I found a guide so perfect, he opened the windows of my heart.
I give my life for that guide, Bahu, who told me the divine mystery.
(Elias 1998: 99).

Gurmeet explained a disciple's longing to be with the master by way of comparison, retelling a story of Bulleh Shah he learned from Gurumaa.¹¹⁶ Once ousted from his master Inayat Khan's camp, Bulleh Shah tried all kinds of tricks to get close again to his master and hear his words. At one point, he was living at the edge of the master's dwelling place so that he could listen to what was being said inside through the sewage pipe coming out of it. Inayat Khan discovered Bulleh and had someone jostle the gutters, piercing Bulleh's ear, which sent him away again. Bulleh, however, did not give up. Ultimately, after many such bold, yet foiled, attempts, Bulleh Shah dedicated himself to learning dance in order to win his master's favor, and apprenticed himself to a professional dancer, learning everything she had to offer in hopes for a chance to perform for his master. After many years of study, he perfected the art, shaved his face, dressed like a woman, and came to dance before his master at an annual function celebrated at a local saint's tomb (*dargah*). Even though he had punished Bulleh by kicking him out, my teller explained, Inayat Khan dearly loved his student and was always aware of each attempt to reenter the ashram. After watching Bulleh dance in ecstasy with tears of longing streaming forth from his eyes as he moved gracefully like a woman, the Master called Bulleh over, embraced him and told him that he was now the perfect disciple because he had shed his manhood. The master understood that

¹¹⁶ Gurumaa's version of this story has since been published in English (Gurumaa 2011a: 174-182). My telling here differs slightly from the version in Gurumaa's book to reflect her disciple's retelling. I note that he had heard more than one version of the story. See also Puri and Shangari (1986).

through separation and longing, Bulleh had been purified. His master put him through the ultimate test, separation. The torture he experienced in separation from his Lord, translators from the Radhasoami Satsang in Beas explain, “was to make him fit to receive the invaluable wealth of the Word of God” (Puri and Shangari 1986: 24).

Bulleh’s story exemplifies not only Bulleh’s devotion to the master, but also the master’s love for Bulleh. Puri and Shangari note, “The master is never indifferent to his disciple” (24). According to all tellings I received, Bulleh’s period of trial away from his master was his master’s way of testing. Like a woman in desperation to be with her Beloved, Bulleh, a true disciple, shed all ego to be with the master, even taking tutelage from a professional dancer, certainly not proper behavior for the son of a Sufi scholar.¹¹⁷

A disciple shared a story of Gurumaa answering her heart’s desire. During an ashram visit, she and her husband had kneeled before Gurumaa and begged her to visit their home during her upcoming *Amrit Varsha* program in the Chandigarh area. However, at the time they had *hoped* for a visit from Gurumaa, they received a call instructing them to go instead to the home of another local volunteer for darshan. Going with the flow, though somewhat disappointed, they quickly got ready to head out. Leaving their home, they received another call to inform them that Gurumaa would arrive at their home momentarily. Upon her arrival, Gurumaa explained her sudden change of plans and decision to come, saying this devotee “had been pulling her heart strings” (*dil kī tār khīnch rahe the*).

¹¹⁷ Also notable in the stories of Bulleh Shah and Inayat Khan is the fact that Bulleh came from a higher caste community. His father was a religious scholar while his spiritual master was a mango farmer. Gurumaa tells the story of their first meeting, a battle of miracles with Bulleh hungry for a mango, forcing one to drop by reciting from the Quran. When the mango-farmer-murshid, Inayat Khan, comes along to find Bulleh eating one of his mangos, he asks how Bulleh got it down. Bulleh proudly showed him, then Inayat Khan made every mango in the grove fall to the ground and then fly back up to re-attach to the tree from which it came. See Gurumaa and Puri and Shangari for versions of this story (Gurumaa 2011: 177-78; Puri and Shangari 1986: 8-10).

For some time, Gurumaa resisted the guru title and the “guru game,” which she relates as the giving of initiation (*dīkṣā*) for the purpose of receiving gift offerings (*dakṣiṇā*). She often talks about “fraudsters” using the name guru, giving *dīkṣā* to naïve devotees, who think this exchange is all they need to get enlightened. However, she eventually accepted devotees’ pleas for *dīkṣā*, which she offers now with a fair amount of explanation about how this moment marks a new beginning, not the end of the journey. In New Jersey, prior to offering it to disciples there, Gurumaa refers to *dīkṣā* as “the love-bridge between master and disciple,” and a formal acknowledgment that student and teacher “work together,” through their relationship, which is “a communion of hearts.”¹¹⁸ A story Gurumaa tells, which expresses the essence of this initiation as love-bridge spread across the world of duality, is that of Kabir and his unconventional *dīkṣā* taken from Swami Ramanand, who would not have otherwise accepted a low caste disciple from the Muslim weaver community. Gurmeet who offered the stories of Bulleh Shah shared this story too. I tell his version of this well-known tale. Kabir laid down to sleep on the steps of the Ganga right in the path he knew Ramanand to take daily to the river. When Ramanand stepped on Kabir, he exclaimed “Ram!” and then said to Kabir, “You should not be sleeping late. You should be repeating Ram, Ram, Ram!” Maneuvering his way into discipleship with Ramanand, Kabir got his guru and his *guru-mantra* initiation too. Gurumaa tells the story in elaborate detail emphasizing Ramanand’s tremendous love for Kabir upon discovery of his new disciple.¹¹⁹ Receiving the Lord’s name (*nām*) from the guru, the Sikh gurus sing, is the door to experience the Lord within.

¹¹⁸ Amrit Varsha, 12 May 2007: Secaucus, New Jersey.

¹¹⁹ Gurumaa’s version is told in her book on the guru-disciple relationship (2011a: 198-203).

Such is the power of the communion of hearts according to the tradition of *guru-bhakti*, that love in separation (*viraha*) like Bulleh’s can be purifying and transformative, and that a low caste weaver like Kabir finds his way into a bond of love with his guru, despite the odds. Divine madness in love (*prem dīvānī*), such as Mirabai’s for Lord Krishna and demonstrated in Bulleh’s display for Inayat Khan, is prevalent in Sufi lore as well as in *bhakti yoga*, and it is not at all uncommon in guru-devotion. From the stance of the Tibetan tradition, Lama Marut explains that the devotee’s love can look a little like obsessive compulsion, at first.¹²⁰ In the language of *bhakti*, divine love is described as intoxicating. Sahajo writes of the effects of receiving the guru’s “cup of love” (*prem piyāla*):

Charandas the true guru
 prepared the cup of love for me.
 Sahajo was intoxicated
 and wallowed in the fourth stage. . .

When the mind is intoxicated with love,
 all speech is turned to babble.
 Sometimes the mouth is filled with laughter,
 sometimes the eyes are filled with tears.

When the mind is intoxicated with love,
 the whole world is transformed.
 Sahajo could no longer discriminate
 between a pauper and a prince. (Aveling and Joshi 2001: 173).

Worship of the guru, arising naturally in the disciple who has taken the “cup of love” or upon whom “love has launched a raid,” can serve to routinize this love and discipline the emotions unleashed into a system of one-pointed focus towards the goal—the guru’s own state. That with which the disciple seeks union is not the physical

¹²⁰ Marut, Lama Sumati. accessed November 2011. Interview with Drishti Point Radio: Lama Marut on the Bhagavad Gita. <http://drishtipoint.ca/podcast/lamamarut.mp3>.

form of the guru, but the state, which the human teacher perfectly embodies. Gurumaa expresses frustration with seekers who fail to understand this subtle point and merely worship her photograph or get “attached” to her with “golden chains.”¹²¹ Like many spiritual communities, the practices that Gurumaa prescribes for those who look to her for guidance are yogic practices much like those that Shukadev gave to Charandas. Those practices also serve as the means for maintaining connection to the guru.

For a great many on the path of *guru-bhakti*, the guru is the most preferred object of worship (*iṣṭadeva*), not only in their outward ritual activity such as pilgrimage and temple *pūjā*, which is typically secondary to yogic spiritual discipline – and by self-design – but also in their hearts. A grandmother in Nagpur explained to me that when she sits for her *dhyān*, she enters into communion with Gurumaa. Spiritual union with the guru is indeed the immediate goal for seekers on the *guru-mārga*; in experiencing the guru’s state in this way, first hand, the disciple trains herself to abide in the guru’s state. For the *guru-bhakta*, the practices recommended by the guru become far more important than ritual inherited through “tradition.”

In verse 174 of the *Guru Gita*, Shiva explains that “absorption in the guru” (*guru-bhāvaḥ*), such as that we might imagine the grandma in Nagpur to experience, is the “highest [most sacred] pilgrimage place” (*param tīrtham*), naming the guru’s big toe as the abode of all places of pilgrimage. The notion of the guru’s body as the most sacred site for pilgrimage is common throughout the *sant* tradition and in the *Adi-Granth*.

Gurumaa sang it too when she offered Charandas’ *bhajan* to express the essence of the

¹²¹ The expression “Golden chains” (alternatively “golden-handcuffs”) is a common metaphor for the devotee who merely trades one form of attachment (chains to the world, or *saṃsāra*) for another, the guru’s “golden chains,” which look better and may be an improvement, but nonetheless, are still chains of attachment.

Guru Gita scripture. Charandas sings, “The guru himself is our pilgrimage site” (*guru hi tīrat barat hamara*). Kabir, sang of the sentiment as well, as did his legendary *satguru*, Ramanand, to whom this rare hymn is attributed—found in the Sikh *Adi-Granth*.

Pilgrimage to the temple is pilgrimage to nothingness,
Pilgrimage to the *tirthas* is nothing but water!
Pilgrimage to the *Atits* is the sole fruitful pilgrimage,
as they have words of ambrosia. GB 97. (Vaudeville 1997: 99)¹²²

As in the Sanskrit *Guru Gita*, songs in vernacular bhakti traditions represent the guru not only as pilgrimage site (literally a crossing place, *tīrtha*, or *tīrat* as Charandas sings in *Braj Bhasha*), but also as the one who grants passage, or takes disciples across the world of delusion (*māyā*) and attachment (*moha*) and endless rebirth (*saṃsāra*). In her own *bānī*, Gurumaa sings to the guru in the stance of devotee, “You have crossed, and now delivered me” (*āp tare ho mohe tāre*).

The guru’s grace: *kripa*

Teaching the practices with which the disciple can connect to the divine energy manifest in the guru is understood to be the ultimate act of grace, for the enlightened being could easily just exist in the state without sharing. Therefore, it is through the practices taught by the teacher that the student maintains connection. A common practice of *guru-bhakti* is repetition of the mantra given by the guru (*mantra-japa*). For many disciples, receiving a mantra from the guru represents initiation and acceptance as the guru’s student, as we saw exemplified in the story of Kabir, even though he received his *guru-mantra* in an unconventional way. Geeta expressed the importance of *guru-mantra* in her own practice: “Having a mantra from the guru is like having the

¹²² The *atit* is one who has “gone beyond.” Vaudeville anglicizes the Indic word here, adding “s” to make it plural (Vaudeville 1993: 99).

guru’s phone number!” Indeed many disciples felt that mantra chanting forged “the link” necessary to tune into the guru’s “wavelength.” Once tuned into the particular wavelength of the guru, Gurumaa explains, “the Guru need not say a word, not a single word. In that situation the nectar of wisdom will percolate into the disciple’s heart without any need left for words” (Gurumaa 2011a: 58). The language of phone numbers and radio-frequencies prevalent in modern gurus’ own words and repeated by devotees, is obviously not part of early medieval Sanskrit scriptural traditions or even the later *sant* traditions, yet the idea of maintaining connection to the teacher through the practices the teacher prescribes is there in Charandas’ 18th century songs as well as in Shiva’s words to Parvati.¹²³

Many of Gurumaa’s devotees whom I met in their hometowns expressed great longing for connection to the guru, who represents for them the ideal state of being. They expressed longing to be near, like Charandas in Gurumaa’s story separate from Shukadev for over 12 years, and they suffer the distance from their beloved guru. Immersing themselves in Gurumaa’s media output – her discourses, her songs, her guided meditation and *mantra japa* recordings – devotees seek to establish and maintain a link with their guru’s power. Those who live in the Buddhafield, too, pine for Gurumaa when she is away and cry tears of rejoice when she returns from her tours. Even when Gurumaa was “in house,” I observed *viraha* as a powerful force in the lives of ashramites –an indication that the devotee’s true object of longing is not the guru in bodily form, but the guru’s own state. Though sometimes painful, like the sting in any relational

¹²³ Much common language and theology exists between Gurumaa’s words and those of Swami Satyasanganda Saraswati and her guru Swami Satyananda Saraswati, who, in their joint publication on the guru-disciple relationship, describe “transmission” as happening only after the disciple tunes into the radio frequency of the guru (1984).

setting of love, a disciple's deep longing for oneness with the guru is an aspect of the guru's *kripa* and a key ingredient in personal transformation.

Another difficult pill to swallow – and part of the master's grace – comes in the form of the master's tests. Gurumaa, remains true to her name “Master Mother” when it comes to the tough love she offers her devotees. The guru's testing, like *viraha*, serves the purpose of purification and thus opens the heart of the devotee, making him more receptive to the guru's wisdom. Gurumaa regularly states to her listeners and would-be disciples: “If you want the easy path, run the other way.” Guru, indeed, can be understood to be taskmaster and sword-wielder on the path of ego eradication. *Who is Durga killing in the mythological stories? Gurumaa asks. She is killing the ego, the demons within your own mind.*¹²⁴ Egoism (*ahaṃkāra*) is one's mistaken identity with the small self. The guru, on the other hand, remains in a state of merged identity with the Self. The guru's tests, reprimands and a disciple's *viraha* all help to destroy the ego of the disciple and ready her for transformation. Surrender does not come easily, they say in the world of *guru-bhakti*. In fact, making a conscious act of surrender defeats the whole purpose, it must, rather, happen naturally. For some, merely the presence of the guru or even remembrance of the guru inspires surrender to happen naturally. Swami Satyasangananda, a female guru in the lineage of Swami Satyananda Saraswati of the Bihar School of Yoga, has written that in the face of the guru's power, the devotee has “no option but to surrender” (1984: 20). For many attracted to the guru, however, in order for this to happen, the guru must first wield her sword to sever the disciple's attachments. *Ahaṃkāra* weakened, the guru's love then “launches the raid.”

¹²⁴ These words come from Gurumaa's discourses during a festival celebration in the ashram. The words were originally in English, taken from my handwritten notes.

Some disciples identified Gurumaa as their personal [inner] Demon-Slayer, Durga. For these disciples, like Durga, the guru attracts with her stunning beauty, loves like a mother, and has proven herself the only being capable of slaying their demons (even after the male gods have failed). She seemed like Durga to me, at least, the morning she entered the *yoga āsana* class and proceeded to harshly scold a handful ashramites for laziness in their *sādhana* and weak performance of *sevā* assignments. Her switching around of jobs – effective immediately – left the room in a solemn repentant hush. Stories of gurus testing disciples abound in literature ancient and recent. Marpa’s testing of Milarepa, putting his student through years of toil building towers and knocking them down, serves – like Inayat Khan forcing Bulleh Shah into years of painful *viraha* – as a potent example of the master readying the disciple for the transmission of knowledge he will receive. The master’s act of testing is not bounded to any one tradition, but rather, spans nearly all Indian traditions of discipleship.

Two of the ultimate testers come from the Sikh tradition. In the well-known story of Amrit initiation, Guru Gobind Singh asks for five followers (*sikhs*, literally meaning “learners”) to offer their heads as a test of loyalty and surrender.¹²⁵ Such an act from the sword-wielding 10th guru in a war-torn period of Sikh history, though harsh indeed, comes perhaps as less of a surprise to Gurumaa’s listeners than a similarly grotesque testing from the ever-peaceful Guru Nanak who spent his life immersed not in war but in song. Gurumaa reminds her audience that Nanak too tested his *sikhs*, retelling the well-known succession narrative in which Nanak near the end of his life identifies his “one true disciple,” Lahina, to whom he gave the name Guru Angad

¹²⁵ He does not sever any of the five heads from the bodies offered, but instead anoints them with the nectar or “ambrosia” (*amrit*).

(meaning limb of the guru). In a series of tests leading up to the ultimate, one by one devotees walking with Nanak turned back leaving only two who stayed with him. In this narrative, Nanak asks his two disciples to pull back the shroud lying on top of a corpse and eat that which they find beneath it. Only one of the two *sikhs* remaining this far on the journey acquiesced to Nanak's seemingly obscene command. As he pulled back the shroud, he found only roses there.¹²⁶ Thus, Nanak determined his successor, the true disciple and only one worthy to receive the treasure of his wisdom.

After the Durga of Gurumaa Ashram wielded her sword in *āsana* class, Aparna explained the essence of testing, echoing Kabir (I paraphrase her words): *The guru, like the potter, must beat the outside of the pot in order to shape it and remove the cracks, thus transforming the clay into a worthy vessel. But while doing this, Aparna explained, the guru keeps a loving hand of support on the inside of the pot.*¹²⁷ Aparna explained that Gurumaa really “doesn’t care an iota” about how the ashram is being run, but that she cares about her disciples and their progress. When she changes someone’s *sevā*, Aparna noted, she has her reasons that may be beyond our capacity to understand at the time. She is working on us. We can get sad or angry, but “she scolds us out of so much compassion. We are here by our own wishes.” In a later conversation on the same topic, Aparna offered another apt comparison for the master mother’s tough love as well as an indicator of the nature of her own loving relationship to her teacher: “Gurumaa is the typical Indian mother!”

Gurumaa tests not only those living in the Buddhafield but she also tests her

¹²⁶ This narrative is found in the stories of Nanak’s life (*janam sakhis*). See W.H. McLeod’s translation of this story (1984: 26-27).

¹²⁷ W.K. Mahony found Kabir’s metaphor relevant in his discussion of Siddha Yoga gurus as well. See (1997: 254). Villagers explain the meaning of Kabir’s well-known verse in a recent film on the living tradition of Kabir’s word in 21st century India, *Word within the Word*, directed by Rajula Shah (2008).

householder devotees. In 2009, just before a scheduled appearance in Ludhiana, as usual Gurumaa received invitations from several devotees to stay in their homes during her visit. Gurumaa asked each of them, she explained to me, to show her their *sādhana* diaries and refused to stay with anyone unless they had been keeping up with their yogic practices for at least two months. Frustrated with her disciples' lack of discipline, she turned down the requests one by one, stating that she would stay in a hotel instead. Aparna retold this story to illustrate her point about the guru's testing as demonstration of the guru's compassion.

Gurumaa tested her householder disciples from the very beginning, explained my Amritsar storyteller, Prema. Prema told about Mohani, who received the Radha-Gurumaa darshan and later offered her own son (Gurumaa's Right Hand Man) for a lifetime of service.¹²⁸ Prema explained, "She used to get punished a lot by Gurumaa and she would take it and love it a lot. We have a saying in Punjabi, 'If guru rebukes me I feel sweet about it'" (*je gur chidke te mīṭhī lāge*). Sanjay had also been tested many times by Gurumaa. "She turned that lion into a pussy cat," Prema explained, "She would kick him out of the room where she offered darshan and rebuke him often." Acts of rebuke, and other moments of discomfort between guru and disciple may ultimately be seen as the guru's *kripa*. My Amritsar conversation partner shared a story of her own in which she firmly believed it was Gurumaa's rebuke and her own resultant response of utter embarrassment that opened her up to her own first powerful religious experience.

Contemporary gurus sometimes compare the work they do on the disciple's ego to the work of a psychotherapist.¹²⁹ Or, as Gurumaa puts it to her Washington, DC

¹²⁸ Gurumaa's Right Hand Man has been with her since the beginning. He was just 13 years old at the time they met, he told me when he and I first met in New Jersey. His mother and *dadi-ji* were also devotees.

¹²⁹ For one example see Swami Satyasangananda and Swami Satyananda Saraswati (1984: 246-248).

audience in 2009, “If you have a *satguru* in your life, you don’t have any need for a shrink.” As Sanjay reported, the guru comes into your life to help with the changes. Nearly every devotee I met who had been on the path for several years reported some old bad habit that had merely fallen away after their encounter with Gurumaa. Drinking, chasing women, eating meat were at the top of the list for men who volunteered the information. Most women who shared this type of information reported dropping the habit of useless chatter, while one woman explained that her former strong interest in “kitty parties” just left her life on its own, over time. Both male and female disciples attested to having dropped out of the “rat race” after Gurumaa turned them in the direction of spiritual seeking.

Not only did devotees attest to bad habits falling away but they also reported improvement in all areas of their lives and attributed all successes in jobs, education, and relationships to *guru-kripa*. Two women in separate conversations and contexts expressed *guru-kripa*’s relationship to the conception and birth of a late-in-life child. One explained that she had been infertile and then soon after meeting Gurumaa and falling in love with her, something opened inside her. Not willing to make a firm statement or use the word miracle, she suggested that upon meeting Gurumaa, the life-energy (*prāna*) perhaps began to move more freely through her body. She was not certain what, but “something” happened and she was able to get pregnant without further medical intervention. Another saw her young son as embodiment of *kripa*.

The ultimate grace of the guru, whether it comes to the disciple as result of close proximity to the guru, through initiation, or more uncomfortably through the pain in separation and the guru’s tests, is the devotee’s own experience. One could

spend a lifetime reading books, Gurumaa explains, books that offer examples of others' experience, but seekers should not take these as their own; though it may inspire, it is not enough to read about or listen to another's experience. *That is like trying to satisfy your hunger with a photograph of food. If you lick the photo, will that satisfy?* Gurumaa asks. That experience, according to the tradition of *guru-bhakti* cannot happen through effort alone, it happens through grace. *It is one thing to sit with me and enjoy the party that is happening around me*, Gurumaa explains, *but you need to experience this party within your self.*

Following the teachings of one *satguru*, instead of listening to many, is a commonly held ideal in circles of *guru-bhakti*. However, not all Gurumaa's students I met looked to her alone as their guru.¹³⁰ Tom, who had already "popped the question" to Karunamayi, thought of her as his "sweetheart." However, Gurumaa's powerful words and Mata Amritanandamayi's embodied expression of divine Love – hugging all who come for her darshan – had also captivated him. Tom was not the only seeker I met who felt the need for three divine mothers. Laleshwari* in Kolkata had taken *dīkṣā* from Gurumaa and Mata Amritanandamayi (Amma) before that and had also taken *shaktipat* initiation from Swami Chidvilasananda (Gurumayi) as well.¹³¹ She felt she was learning from all of these teachers and she got something different from each of them. It is well known among devotees that Gurumaa had more than one teacher. She sat with many different masters, starting from childhood, but we must also suppose that it is to one of

¹³⁰ Maya Warrior also found this to be the case in her ethnographic research among Mata Amritanandamayi's admirers (2005).

¹³¹ I asked Laleshwari if she felt particularly drawn to *female* gurus. She did not see any conscious choosing of female spiritual teachers, but she noted that she also had the intention to go meet Sri Sri Ravi Shankar when he visited Kolkata and considered taking *dīkṣā* from him as well. However, when he came, she just completely forgot. But at the times when she managed to take *dīkṣā* from each of the three female gurus, everything had fallen into place for those encounters to happen.

them that she gave her heart, the one who inspired her heartfelt songs of guru devotion.

Far more often than the ideal of having only one *satguru*, Gurumaa stresses the absolute necessity of having a “living guru.” Dead gurus’ teachings, available in books and scriptures, Gurumaa, explains, can be helpful but they can also be manipulated in a way the living teacher’s words cannot. Swami Muktananda spoke on this topic as well: “Although scriptures emphasize surrender, vows and discipline, they are lifeless.... [O]ne can interpret them in any way one likes. But one cannot interpret the Guru. You may change the scriptures, but the Guru will certainly change you” (Muktananda 2000: 89). At her meditation retreat in Florida, in 2008, Gurumaa stated, “It suits people to believe in dead masters because it does not harm their egos.”

In all of Gurumaa’s stories about gurus and disciples an underlying teaching exists. Gurumaa constantly repeats the statement, “I don’t want followers. I want seekers.” Through her stories, she provides models of perfect disciples, like Charandas and Sahajo Bai, and like Lahina, named Guru Angad by his teacher Nanak. Once in a private conversation I noted to Gurumaa that she had a number of loyal disciples around her who had been with her from the beginning. These disciples today serve in various roles, often as her closest attendants. In response to my comment, she offered a story of Siddhartha Buddha and his disciple-attendant, Ananda.

As is the way of a number of guru storytellers, and quite characteristic of Gurumaa’s telling of tales, she shared with me a personalized version of Ananda’s discipleship. Ananda, she explained, was elder cousin to Buddha and before he took initiation from Buddha, gave one last order to his junior cousin. He said, I will take

initiation from you and become your disciple doing whatever you wish but before that, you must vow never to send me away; you must always let me stay close. I will even sleep on the floor at the foot of your bed. And so, Gurumaa explained, Ananda stayed with the Buddha, serving him and sleeping next to him on the floor for over forty years. Something about Gurumaa's version of the story rang oddly in my ears. In my early scholarly attempts at fact checking, no doubt a dubious process for a story with roots 2,500 years old, I learned that Ananda by most all accounts was known to be the younger cousin of Siddhartha, younger than Ananda's elder brother Devadatta and older than Siddhartha's son, Rahula.¹³² Age-hierarchy was important to Gurumaa's story as a way of explaining how a disciple could reverse spiritual-hierarchy to make demands of a master—an inversion truly unheard of in the circle around Gurumaa, a teacher who appears to have no hesitation in playing the difficult (and higher) role of master. The larger truth in Gurumaa's version of the story, however, lies in her expression of the student's longing to be near the teacher – in every possible moment – a “fact” of studentship that was clearly evident to this observer living for a time in her Buddhafield.

Modern Buddhist accounts of “Ananda's conditions” have something to offer the conversation at hand, too.¹³³ Ananda asked conditions of the Buddha, not when he joined the *sangha* and became disciple, but rather, when he accepted the assignment as

¹³² It should be noted that Gurumaa told this story to me alone. In another telling for another audience, she might emphasize a different aspect of the story. She has talked about the Buddha and Ananda on several occasions and I have not heard all of her stories, so what I share below from my own studies, she may also have mentioned in other settings.

¹³³ To compare one modern storyteller's version to that of other modern tellers, for the narrative of Ananda's conditions, I look to Thich Nhat Hahn (1991: 54-55) and Ananda Coomaraswamy (1964: 67-68). For the sake of space and focus, I do not go into other differences between Gurumaa's telling and these or contrasts between Nhat Hanh's and Coomaraswamy's, such as explanations of Ananda's sleeping arrangements, acceptance of hospitality when accompanying the Buddha, etc.

personal attendant during the Buddha's later years, when the need for assistance arose. Until that point, the job had been shared by a number of close disciples. The well-documented story exists in multiple and varied renditions. In most, disciples offer themselves one after another, but none are chosen. The Buddha himself chooses Ananda, and accepts Ananda's noble, if bold, conditions. In one rendition, Ananda insisted that if he ever misses any teaching (ie. in fulfilling his role as attendant), that the Buddha share that teaching with him later. It is often said that Ananda never missed any of the Buddha's *dharma* talks. All of Ananda's conditions lend themselves to and have been subject of various interpretations, but from the Buddhist perspective this condition attests to Ananda's deep appreciation for the teacher's Word (in Buddhist terms, the Dharma).

Another relevant component in the Buddha-Ananda story, but not shared by Gurumaa, is that Ananda, in his extensive years of service, did not attain nirvana during the master's lifetime as did many other disciples. Contemporary Buddhist leader, Thich Nhat Hanh explains, that it was not until after the Buddha's death, when the need for preserving the Dharma unfolded, that Ananda attained *arhat*-ship. In this and other Buddhist accounts, Ananda remembered his master's words unerringly and had long enjoyed the reputation for such among his peers in the *sangha*, even during the Buddha's lifetime. However, when the council met after the Buddha's death to preserve their master's words, only those who had attained *arhat*-ship could participate in the conversations. Relieved of his many responsibilities as the Buddha's attendant, and immersed in his own meditation, Ananda attained nirvana at the appropriate moment to enter the conversation and utter to the council, "Thus have I heard."

Conclusions

Meeting a *satguru* is one thing, meeting one's Gurudev, however, seems to be another. A number of devotees with whom I conversed had met many saints and among them many they would consider *satgurus* because they were speaking Truth (*satya*), but their true love and devotion blossomed only in the context of the heart connection with their own Gurudev. Even when a devotee's initial attraction to the guru had not been characterized by *rahasya*, but perhaps through attraction to the physical form, as manifest in the beauty of the body, the voice or the words, the love that developed between the guru and disciple, in relationship, was understood to contain that mystery. The love between the guru and disciple was understood as divine love.

Most seekers I met did not hear the call of the divine Beloved in the same dramatic fashion of the Amritsar doctor, nor did they report visions of Radha. However, most still came to know of Gurumaa through voice—a Voice that had called to them via audiocassette, radio, TV or Internet.

The devotee connects to the Self through devotion, surrender and service to the true guru. The living guru's Word, a seed, is planted in the heart. In Gurumaa's *sangha*, I found that Word took many forms, in live spoken discourse, in song, in audio CDs of mantra chanting and meditation guided by the guru's voice, and in YouTube *bhajan* videos, to name only a few. Called by Voice or other form, the seeker proceeds on the *mārga*, a path lit by the light the *satguru* emits. To Where does the path lead? To *hṛdayākāśa-madhyastham*, verse 113 of the *Guru Gita* tells us, to that place where the guru is seated in the center of the space of the heart. When Gurumaa tells seekers, "I am always with you." She speaks not as Gurpreet Kaur, the girl from Amritsar who played

pranks and followed her mother's wise insistence to get an education. Nor does she speak as the body she inhabits today. To those who are immersed in her devotion, she speaks as *brahmanishta*, one established in the Absolute (Brahman).

The individual particularities in *guru-bhakti* cannot be overemphasized; each student comes to the guru through her own life's vectors and brings along her own conditionings (*guṇas*), social conditioning, and according to Indic religious traditions, her inborn conditioning and imprints from past lives (*saṃskāra* and *vāsanā*). Each devotee thus relates to Gurumaa in his own way. Some relate to her through myth models of divinity like Krishna, Radha, Shiva or Durga. Another understands Gurumaa to be like Guru Govind Singh. Another sees her as the "typical Indian mother."

For the disciple, a key word from Gurumaa, and exemplified by Sahajo Bai, is surrender. But this surrender is something that happens naturally when the disciple is in a state of love for the master, she explains. One does not just decide one day to surrender. It happens instinctively, *sahaj*. According to the tradition of *guru-bhakti*, wisdom arises spontaneously – from within – as the disciple hears the master's voice in his own heart. Surrender is not necessarily a submission to a human teacher or master, though it sometimes looks like that on the surface. *Samarpaṇ*, on the path of *guru-bhakti*, is surrender to a process in which the master plays an integral and indispensable role. As it is said: "When the disciple is ready, the guru appears." In Gurumaa's *loka*, the process is a divine process in which the teacher and the student participate, a process, nonetheless containing clear and traditional roles for disciple and the master.

To follow Gurumaa's logic and utilize her language in her rendering of *dīkṣā* as the "love-bridge between the guru and disciple," we might extend the metaphor to

describe the relationship of guru and disciple itself. That “bond of love” Gurumaa sings about and talks so extensively of might be understood as the “love-bridge” to God—or to the Self or to enlightenment or to freedom. Gurumaa explains that where Jesus’ disciples failed (besides in their misrepresentation of his Word as most all disciples fail according to Gurumaa) was in not attaining their master’s state. Their master had explained clearly that the kingdom of God lies within, but either awed by his greatness or floundering in their weaknesses, displayed through denial (Peter) and betrayal (Judas), Jesus’ disciples failed to attain that. Jesus’ greatest disciples, according to Gurumaa, were Mary the mother and Mary Magdalene, who immersed in real grief and devotion realized the Spirit (represented by Jesus’ appearance to them at the tomb, which the male disciples doubted). In Gurumaa’s words about Jesus, we find expression of a fine Vedantic line existing in *guru-bhakti*, or perhaps any disciple’s devotion to any human master, that line between recognition of the master’s state as the goal and turning the master’s form into yet another icon.

In terms of Gurumaa’s vast media output, a topic to which I will return throughout, and especially in Chapter 6, on the outer surface, much that surrounds this “no-rerun” guru looks awfully new; she has a new ashram, new website, and complete engagement with glossy new age media. But here I ask readers to take a step back and consider the Buddhafield from the insider perspective. From this view we might see Gurumaa’s savvy young tech-team as new age Anandas working to re-distribute (transmit) the master’s Word and attract others to what they understand as Truth.

CHAPTER 3
What's New about New Age Gurus?

Life Positive magazine, “Your complete guide to personal growth,” sells in the contemporary urban Indian market for 50 rupees, a little more than one US Dollar and a little less than one Euro. The inclusive nature of this magazine with everything from features on contemporary Indian gurus to Reiki, Yoga and crystals, Smriti Srinivas writes, “suggests that there may be an Indian New Age, creative and alternative rather than purely derivative – and transnational in its own right” (Srinivas 2008: 339).

The January 2008 issue of *Life Positive* carries, as its cover story, “New Year messages from the masters,” and features short writings of one or two pages each written in English by eight contemporary Indian gurus (all male, incidentally) for the New Year 2008.¹³⁴ The Editor’s letter on the inside cover states that these masters will “guide you on getting happy, successful, strong, loving, prosperous, peaceful, and cultivating the quality of studentship and transparency. This is our way of wishing you a Happy New Year.” In this letter she also notes that the messages from these masters are meant “to get the year off to a rollicking start, and help you get to grips with *Project You*.” I italicize the already capitalized “Project You” to demonstrate *Life Positive* magazine’s own consonance with the “self-spirituality” that has come to characterize New Age religion more generally.¹³⁵

¹³⁴ The prominence of female gurus today will be discussed in a chapter to follow. Suffice it to say, here, that despite the prominence of female gurus today, male gurus still vastly outnumber their female peers. This perhaps explains why all 8 eight masters who gave New Year messages were male.

¹³⁵ See Paul Heelas (1996) on “self-spirituality.” In general, Heelas’ work on spirituality and New Age religion, though it stresses the “self,” contrasts with the work of other scholars writing on spirituality who criticize such “self” spirituality for its complicitness with capitalist consumption and reinforcement of the status quo (Carrette and King 2005). Heelas (1996, 2008), on the other hand, attempts to demonstrate that spiritualities, even though focused on the self, can and do challenge a dysfunctional mainstream society. In some cases, as will be noted later in this essay, self-spirituality can lead individual selves to focus on care for others as well as care for the self, both collectively (through the institutions

The eight masters' messages address all of the above as stated by the editor, but their words, if sometimes cloaked in the rhetoric of contemporary spirituality, appear rooted in ancient Indian religious concepts. These gurus, often called New Age gurus by the Indian popular press, kept Sanskrit terms at a minimum and offered teachings that were sometimes encased in the language of modern science. Simultaneously, these teachers self-consciously offered "Vedic dictums" for contemplation. The gurus presented simple, effective practices as antidotes to "modern life"; these prescribed exercises were yogic in nature and included methods long-espoused by teachers in India as meditation, mantra chanting and self-reflection. The teacher among these eight perhaps most readily recognizable as a "New Age" guru, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, head of the world-wide movement called Art of Living (AoL), explained to readers that positive changes in emotions will happen "when you nurture yourself with music, prayer, service and silence," at once embracing New Age language of self-help and self-nurture, to espouse well-known yogic practices meant to enhance one's ability to commune with the divine Self (*Life Positive* p. 27).¹³⁶

This chapter examines contemporary Indian gurus, particularly those who have risen to prominence post-1965,¹³⁷ and contemplates the moniker, "New Age" guru, a

founded by a guru) and individually.

¹³⁶ It is important to distinguish here between Self as it is used in Indian English language to denote atman and "self" as it is used more commonly in English language to indicate one individual self among other selves. The upper-case Self is sometimes translated as "soul" or "spirit" and the lower case self indicates, rather, one's own person. That said, there is some blurring and blending of the meanings of self and Self. For instance, scholars who write on "self-spirituality" are primarily talking about a spirituality that centers upon the evolvment of the individual, and sometimes scholars use this in a derogatory way to indicate a spirituality that happens at the level of individuals and at the expense of community. Yet, that evolvment does also involve the Self. "Self-spirituality."

¹³⁷ 1965 is a good place to start with contemporary gurus (especially in the American context) for a couple of reasons. American interest in Indian gurus peaked by and after this time both because of the sixties counter culture, which brought Indian gurus and other teachers from Asia into cultural awareness more generally, and because of the change in US immigration laws in 1965, which allowed greater numbers of Indian immigrants to enter the US and many gurus to follow. By the early 1970s diaspora Indians living in eastern Africa migrated in large numbers to Western Europe, particularly Britain, and

prevalent gloss used in popular Indian news media. In current usage, the term “New Age” no longer describes a particular contemporary or future age. Quite often, it describes something that goes against or somehow rejects inherited traditions; it indicates a break from the past. It may entail adopting old, often foreign and “other” traditions, and usually implies some degree of co-opting, re-shaping, re-packaging and commodifying ancient ideas from diverse sources for the current era. Most often “New Age” indicates a spiritual turn from “old” or “traditional” religion to a “new” spirituality, emphasizing individuality and self-focus. New Age can also indicate something of a global infusion. The referent of "new" is always shifting. The Age of Aquarius (in the context of New Age in North America and Western Europe) once was new; but now global is new, and ironically, old can also be new.

I use the term “New Age” to describe contemporary gurus including Anandmurti Gurumaa in the most literal sense, deeming them gurus of a New Age or New Era. This literal application of the term is something that I heard in conversation with Gurumaa, and this was also behind the initial use of “New Age,” as 60s children in America believed themselves to be ushering in the Age of Aquarius. And, it is in this sense of the term – as in ushering in a New Era – that I see Indian gurus embracing New Age as it applies to their missions half a century later. Indian gurus can be “New Age” in multiple ways. They may be ushering in a new era and at the same time also be repackaging and commodifying ancient teachings into a form attractive, intelligible and consumable (ready for purchase) by New Age seekers. Not only do journalists use “New Age” to describe gurus, but also some Indian gurus themselves have adopted the term, as have many of their followers.

North America during a period of decolonization/Africanization.

Besides their preoccupation with ushering in a ‘new era’, “New Age” gurus are also characterized by the following features. They are, as already noted, concerned with promoting forms of spirituality focused on the empowerment of the (modern) self. They address a cosmopolitan audience cutting across regional, linguistic and cultural divides. They are rooted in the contemporary “global” era defined by easy international travel, electronic technologies, and open markets, and tend to teach to a “universal” audience – an audience not constrained by temporal, spatial or cultural particularities. When addressing these global and diverse audiences, they eschew self-definition in terms of particularistic identities – presenting themselves not as “Hindu” or “Indian” but as “universal” teachers and spiritual preceptors, conveying “truths” that are valid for all time and in all contexts. In what follows, I will explore these aspects of New Age gurus in greater detail. It is worth noting here that the many prominent gurus who, for instance, address regionally or linguistically specific audiences or define themselves in terms of particular regional, caste-based or linguistic identities do not readily fit within the category of the “New Age” guru I examine here, and therefore fall outside the scope of this study.¹³⁸

¹³⁸ One very prominent global guru who comes to mind as not being characterized as New Age for the reasons named here is Pramukh Swami Maharaj, the current leader of the BAPS (Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha). Though Pramukh Swami does teach to a region-specific (Gujarati) body of Vaishnava Hindu followers (devoted to Lord Vishnu and his incarnations), his movement does incorporate some of the other aspects of New Age gurus discussed regarding New Age. However, there seems to be less effort made to cast that message to a larger, broader, more diverse audience, and much of the group’s international focus lies in the preservation and celebration of Gujarati language and culture in addition to disseminating the teachings of the colonial-era founder, Lord Swaminarayan. For an excellent study on BAPS Swaminarayan Hinduism in its transnational context including discussions of the future of Swaminarayan Hinduism and its Gujarati regional appeal, see Raymond Brady Williams (2001).

Gurus as innovators

Before going on to explore the characteristics of New Age gurus in greater detail, I will first explore the connections that link these figures with their many predecessors in the Indian context. Daniel Gold demonstrates continuity of guru devotion from the medieval Hindi *sant* tradition to one of its contemporary spiritual heirs, the Radhasoami movement (Gold 1987a). He correlates the period of impact of conflicting heritages (Hindu and Muslim) to the rise of the medieval *sant* tradition. The colonial era, another age of increasing cultural contact, coincided with the rise of Radhasoami lineages and related guru-oriented traditions (Gold 1987a). In both these eras characterized by profound and complex cultural collisions, *sant* traditions and movements led by iconoclastic gurus played a creative role (Gold 1987a: 212).

Throughout the long history of Indian religious life, gurus in India have oftentimes been innovators and facilitators of intercultural exchange. Through their words, their songs and their teachings – which often form eclectic scriptural canons – they have sought to teach *to* the very temporal setting in which they lived and to meet people *where* they are. Thus adapting to the contemporary context through various syntheses and cultural translation (as well as linguistic translation) is not a *new* thing for gurus to do. Continuity exists between the bhakti poet-saint who brings elite Sanskrit teachings to his contemporary vernacular speaking audience and modern gurus speaking “Guru English” (or nowadays, perhaps Guru English with a New Age twist), adopting a rhetoric that resonates with cosmopolitan audiences around the world.¹³⁹ The bhakti poet-saint, the iconoclastic and synthesizing Hindi or Punjabi *sant*

¹³⁹ In *Guru English*, Aravamudan (2006) surveys Anglophone gurus alongside literary parallels to look at a complicated linguistic system, “Guru English,” informed by the colonial encounter and outbound missionary activity.

and the New Age guru all speak the registers most familiar to their own audiences and offer methods and practices devised to bring students of that particular age to a state where they too might understand, and ideally experience for themselves, eternal Truth.

Even before the colonial encounter, the settings in which people lived were always expanding beyond the known, inherited religio-cultural boundaries to include varying worldviews. In this sense, perhaps there have always been gurus who in some ways saw themselves as teaching in a *new age*, setting, or context. And some may have seen themselves as ushering in a New Age in a time of conflict or repressive social or political regimes, making Truth accessible yet again. Certainly, students of some of the *sants*' saw their own teachers as ushering in a new age, especially those from whom lineages would form, and this is particularly true in the way the early Sikh *panth* came to understand Guru Nanak, the first of the ten Sikh gurus. Bhai Gurdas was close disciple to Guru Arjan (fifth guru), and in his role as amanuensis was responsible for preserving the scriptural authority of the *Adi-Granth* (McLeod 1984).¹⁴⁰ In addition to this important work as compiler and scribe, Bhai Gurdas' own poetic work, *Varan*, itself receives much reverence and is considered part of the Sikh canon, as one of the four texts allowed for recitation in *gurdwaras* (McLeod 1984).¹⁴¹ Bhai Gurdas' *vars*, offer not only commentary on the songs of the first five gurus but narratives of their lives, providing a window into the early Sikh *panth*, through singable Punjabi Verse. Bhai Gurdas, a favorite conversation partner of Gurumaa, sang of Nanak as having been sent by the Lord in response to the anguished cries of humanity in an era of darkness and

¹⁴⁰ McLeod also notes that Bhai Gurdas' long life spanned to overlap with those of the 3rd through 6th Sikh gurus.

¹⁴¹ The scripture allowed for recitation in *gurdwaras*: *Adi-Granth* (songs of the first 5 gurus), *Dasam Granth* (composed by Guru Gobind Singh), and the *vars* of Bhai Gurdas (contemporary of Guru Arjan) and Bhai Nand Lal (from Guru Govind Singh's entourage). No other scripture receives the reverence of the *Adi-Granth*, which is ritually treated as Guru or deity.

strife, “the dark, Dark Age” (*kali yug andheri*).¹⁴² In *Var* 1:27, Bhai Gurdas compares Nanak’s entry to the world in an “Age of Darkness” to the dawn of a new day: “As at the rising of a new day’s sun the stars are hidden and darkness flees away” (McLeod 184:64-65). One of the problem issues of Nanak’s age was caste, and Bhai Gurdas sings that Nanak converted the four castes into one (*Var* 1:23 and 24:4). Another issue was the clash of religious traditions, to which Nanak responded negating his belonging as Hindu or Musalman. He provided his students with a syncretistic new path grounded in songs from the mother tongue.

Certain times of intercultural exchange have interested scholars more than others. Two such periods from the Common Era are marked by the Indian subcontinent’s socio-cultural encounters with the proselytizing religions of Islam and Christianity and the political dominance that seemed inevitably to follow. Indeed some of the most striking traditions surrounding charismatic guru figures came out of periods of profound intercultural encounter; the medieval Hindi *sant* tradition from the time of Islamic cultural impact (close precursor and relative to the early Punjabi *panth* of Nanak), and various movements that scholars have labeled as “neo-Hindu” from the colonial period, which followed and was influenced (in both reactionary and syncretistic ways) by the most intense Christian missionary activity in the subcontinent.¹⁴³

¹⁴²Gurumaa sings Bhai Gurdas’ *vars*, and these have been reproduced on a studio-recorded album, *Nanak Aaya* (Nanak has come). The words here come from *Var* 1:23, Gurumaa’s first track on her audio CD, the refrain from which the album gets its title. McLeod provides a translation of *Var* 1:23 and other selected *vars* (1984: 64), though he translates *kaliyug andheri* as “Age of Darkness.” I translate it as doubly dark.

¹⁴³Neo-Hinduism, briefly, has come to describe religious movements of the 19th century aimed at the regeneration and reform of Hinduism. Neo-Hindu institutional forms were often highly influenced by Christian missionary efforts and institutions in varying ways that have been characterized as both a defense of Hinduism and a synthesis of East and West. For an overview of guru-led neo-Hindu reform movements in an edited volume including articles on Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj, the Ramakrishna Mission and Sri Aurobindo, see Anthony Copley (2000).

New Age Indian gurus like Gurumaa perhaps demonstrate something very intercultural and expansive about the contemporary global encounter, rather than point to clear cut cases of Western cultural dominance sometimes associated with “globalization.” In this regard, we might compare New Age gurus to their modern predecessors, the Anglophone gurus of the colonial era who expounded “neo-Hinduism” (Aravamudan 2006; De Michelis 2004; Waghorne 2009). Though pre-colonial traders, missionaries and settlers in the Indian subcontinent would have already experienced and written about Indian holy men (Narayan 1993), it was during the colonial era in India that the Western world *en masse* became aware of Indian gurus, an already revered and longstanding cultural phenomenon in India. The colonial encounter gave to the well-heeled Indian literati the vehicle of the English language, and ever since the colonial-era, gurus and their spiritual heirs have ridden this vehicle into other worlds (*loka*) beyond their homeland to spread a variety of religious and “spiritual” teachings encompassed in the Indic religious worldview in a reverse-missionary role. As neo-Hindu innovators spread their messages to a milieu beyond birthright Hindus, they did so with a healthy dose of “not-unwarranted” Indian spiritual pride.¹⁴⁴ Well before the end of the colonial era, the most notable of these early gurus, the genteel, English-educated Swami Vivekananda, visited Chicago in 1893 for the World Parliament of Religions and presented his “new” Vedantic vision of the yogic path not only to the United States but also to the English-speaking world.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Here I echo Daniel Gold’s (1987) language in his description of the medieval Hindi *sants*.

¹⁴⁵ Hardly any study on gurus in the West is without its mention of Vivekananda and his paving the way for other Hindu gurus to follow his Westward move. For a monograph-length study of Vivekananda and his mission see (Beckerlegge 2000a); for a controversial study of Vivekananda’s guru and namesake of his mission, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, see (Kripal 1995). For a look at the simultaneous convergence of Vivekananda’s foray into American religious history with streams of expansive dialogue in the academic study of religion as scholars grappled with their known categories see (Waghorne 2009).

Vivekananda and the steady stream of gurus who followed him to the West were themselves deeply influenced by Western-styled education and religious thought, and in turn significantly influenced the religious climate of the cultures in Western Europe and North America. If missionary service and colonial education initiatives influenced exponents of the Bengal Renaissance and various forms of neo-Hinduism throughout the Indian subcontinent (Copley 2000; Jones 1976, 1989; Williams 2001), so too have philosophical concepts from Vedanta (albeit sometimes watered-down versions) informed, and sometimes even formed the basis for New Religious Movements (NRM) in North America and in Western Europe. Some NRM in the West were founded by Indian gurus, such as the Vedanta Society by Vivekananda, the Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF) by Paramahansa Yogananda, the Transcendental Meditation (TM) movement by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, and the Siddha Yoga movement by Swami Muktananda. Each of these modern gurus spent extensive time in Western countries (particularly US) and thus had keen awareness of the lives of middle and upper class Americans. They came to know their audiences well and learned to speak effectively to those Westerners interested in spiritualities alternative to their Judeo-Christian traditions.

Lola Williamson adopts the acronym HIMM for *Hindu-Inspired Meditation Movements*, arguing that movements like SRF, TM, and Siddha Yoga (all mentioned above) together constitute a new religion in the United States (Williamson 2010). Williamson demonstrates mutual acculturation between East and West and discusses the religious scene in America prior to Vivekananda's historical debut. Williamson historically traces the penetration of Hindu thought into American religious and spiritual life from the transcendentalists to Vivekananda, then through the 20th

century, with an insightful account of the “60s and the search for self-fulfillment” as well as addressing the “New Age spiritual smorgasbord.” Williamson concedes that “Neo-Hindu-inspired” as opposed to “Hindu-inspired” may have been a more apt descriptor in her acronym because it was Neo-Hinduism’s influence that inspired the “Hybrid East-West movements” such as Transcendentalism, Theosophy and New Thought and it was Vivekananda’s neo-Hindu universal Vedanta which paved the way for the Indian gurus who would follow him.

Points of enculturation can be seen both at home in India in neo-religious forms and beyond India in HIMMs in the West. In both contexts, expansion and innovation occur, engendering alternatives to “traditional” religious authority while remaining spiritually “Indic” in continuity with teachings from the rich Indian religious past. Many scholars have pointed to the universality of Vedanta as key to the global popularity of guru-led movements (Aravamudan 2006; Kripal 1995; Llewelyn 2004; Urban 2003; Williamson 2010). What these Westward-traveling early gurus took home to India, however, is a subject that remains under-researched. Elizabeth De Michelis argues that Vivekananda brought an already *neo*-Vedanta with him and continued to build on these already hybrid foundations to add Western occultism to his four yogas model (De Michelis 2004: 123-36). I would argue that scholars of religion should begin to look for similar points of mutual enculturation in the teachings and in the style of contemporary Indian New Age gurus.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶ What this chapter does not address is the existence of gurus who really and truly feel belonging to multiple worlds, such as Bri. Maya Tiwari, a spiritual teacher of Indian (Brahmin Hindu) ethnic heritage who grew up in east Africa and settled in America. Tiwari, who we could also call a New Age guru, writes in the introduction to her book on Ayurvedic healing for women, “As in all things, I encourage you to explore and derive strength from your own heritage and traditions, and to understand Vedic ways and wisdom as a universal gift belonging to every person and creature in the universe” (Tiwari 2000: 18).

Though Williamson's focus is on HIMMs in the American context, she notes "In an ironic twist" that "While India's Ramakrishna Mission has emphasized Christian-style good works, America's Vedanta Society has emphasized Hindu philosophy" (Williamson 2010: 38). And she proposes that perhaps Vivekananda was trying to work out some imbalances in each culture: with all of the focus on meditation in HIMMs, "Perhaps the imbalance has reversed to some extent" (Williamson 2010: 213). Waghorne also emphasizes Vivekananda's "Janus face," focusing on yoga as it faced the American religious scene and preaching radical reform to redefine and reunify Neo-Hinduism as it faced India (Waghorne 2009: 140). Sarah Strauss builds on Agehananda Bharati's "pizza effect" theory in examining Vivekananda's yoga presented to the West and again re-presented to his countrymen as "a turning point in the way this ancient system of ideas and practices has been understood" (Strauss 2005: 8).¹⁴⁷ What aspects of non-Indian culture and religion do contemporary Indian gurus like Gurumaa incorporate into their teachings today? New studies of Indian gurus in multiple cultural contexts may provide answers to this important question.

Self-spirituality and the "New Age"

J.E. Llewelyn (2004) notes a neglected question surrounding modern Indian gurus and their groups: Where does East meet West in contemporary guru movements? In his own pondering of this question, he emphasizes two separate patterns of guru-led movements in the West (with respect to the nine groups he examines), one that attracts

¹⁴⁷ Anthropologist and *sannyasi*, Agehananda Bharati, wrote in 1970 of the now well-known "pizza effect" to describe the how Indian concepts which have gone overseas and returned "gather momentum and respect through the process of re-enculturation" in the way that the Italian pizza, a relatively ordinary dish, having gone to America and returned to Italy by way of immigration, gained new status after gaining approval overseas (Bharati 1970: 273).

Indian immigrants, and the other that draws mainly Westerners to the guru's fold. I would refine Llewelyn's second pattern to include other people of non-Indian heritage (besides Westerners) since Indian gurus have large followings in South East Asia and other parts of the world that extend beyond diasporic Indian groups. Llewelyn notes that in certain movements, blurring between these two patterns does occur, as in the case of Swami Bhaktivedanta's ISKCON (Hare Krishna) movement which has drawn Westerners and Indians. Scholars have only begun to address what sort of "blurring" might be occurring in transnational movements of this second pattern. In addition to Indian gurus' own globetrotting beginning with Vivekananda, Westerners have been seeking out Indian gurus and their ashrams in India for at least four decades now.¹⁴⁸ For some clues about the effects of such developments, I turn to recent works by Maya Warrier (2005) and Smriti Srinivas (2008).

Warrier's study of the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission (henceforth MAM), based on fieldwork conducted in India among Mata Amritanandamayi's urban middle class followers, focuses on constructions of modernity within the Mata's fold.¹⁴⁹ In observing the "individual constructions" of religious life, Warrier finds "self-authorship" and "self-fulfillment," concepts commonly associated with the spirituality of NRMs, as key to devotees' constructions of their "Hindu" religious lives. And within the MAM, "religious selfhood" is understood as "malleable and revisable" (Warrier 2005: 64).

¹⁴⁸ If we take Gurumaa's and others' stories about Alexander the Great (known as "Sikandar" in the Indian context) at face value, then Westerners' searches for Indian spiritual teachers began much earlier. According to Gurumaa, Alexander who in his eastward run did not reach India, got close enough to send emissaries into India to bring back a spiritual teacher. Gurumaa credits this unnamed sage for having helped Alexander (on his death bed) to fully realize that he would take nothing with him into grave, that all of his conquests and all of his riches said nothing about his spiritual life. In other words, in the end, only after his encounter with Indian spirituality, his spiritual search began in earnest.

¹⁴⁹ Please note that Warrier calls Mata Amritanandamayi "Mata." She is also known as "Amma," and "Ammachi" all terms meaning mother. I use Mata here as I follow Warrier for this argument.

Warrier notes the “tendency [for scholars of Hinduism] to overlook the *private, individual and interiorized aspect* of modern guru-centered religious organizations in India” at a time when scholars of NRMs are looking at this very aspect in Indian-influenced new religions (2005: 16, *my emphasis*). Along with Warrier’s work, Williamson’s recent study of HIMMs in the American context, Charpentier’s study of seventy female gurus (2010) as well as Srinivas’ study of Satya Sai Baba (2008) begin to fill this gap (2010). The current study also seeks to address the “private, individual and interiorized aspects” of *guru-bhakti* in our current age.

Such constructions of religious selfhood as seen in the MAM and in the HIMMs discussed by Williamson in many ways seem to be in consonance with the “self-spirituality” of New Age religion in the West as described by Paul Heelas (1996). Heelas, however, situates the “New Age” entirely in the West. Srinivas notes in her multi-sited ethnographic study of the Sai Baba movement that Heelas’ “projection... of a division between the indigenous South Asian and the transnational cosmopolitanism of the New Age perhaps creates more problems than it solves” (Srinivas 2008: 339). Based on admittedly short fieldwork outside of England, Heelas contrasts California New Agers to “Upper-class Indians going to the Theosophical Society, middle-class Indians visiting Sai Baba’s ashram, or Indian hippies sitting on the rocks of Mahabalipuram, [who] are best not thought of as ‘New Age.’” He argues also that Osho Rajneesh was just another Indian guru in the 1970s in India, but that in Oregon, with his Western following, he is “best regarded as New Age” (Heelas 1996: 122-23).

Following the path of a guru may seem more “new” to a Euro-American Californian than it does to someone from Bangalore, Mumbai or Delhi. However, what

Heelas does not discuss is the extent to which ideas from outside of India pervade the teachings of New Age gurus, especially of Rajneesh, and then influence patterns of spiritual seeking back in India. The difference between Indian and Western followers of contemporary gurus such as Sathya Sai Baba, Mata Amritanandamayi, Gurumayi Chidvilasananda, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and many others may not be as sharp as Heelas proposes, at least with respect to consumptive patterns when it comes to New Age spirituality.¹⁵⁰ In 2008, Eckhart Tolle's bestselling *The Power of Now* (2001) and Elizabeth Gilbert's spiritual memoir, *Eat, Pray Love* (2006), seemed just as popular in Delhi as they were in New Age book stores across America.¹⁵¹ Heelas' time in India before writing *The New Age Movement* (1996) would have been before major changes in India's urban cultural environment that occurred after economic liberalization in 1991. In later work, Heelas mentions India as home to the world's largest middle class with a "rapidly growing mind-body-spiritual-wellbeing sector rooted in the indigenous and the western" (2008: 232). Indeed the 1990s were years of rapid change in Indian markets and this includes the spiritual marketplace. Brian Hatcher describes the Indian middle class thus: "Freed from the need to labor, and flush with capital, this middle class expresses and defines itself in the marketplace. We might say that one way it does so is by consuming Hinduism" (Hatcher 2007: 301). I would like to build on Hatcher's statement to say that middle-class Indians consume *religion and spirituality*, more generally—not merely what we call "Hinduism." When Gurumaa's followers purchase

¹⁵⁰ I realize the irony in using the "language of consumption" to talk about new age spirituality and Heelas' work; Heelas has criticized scholars and their acerbic skills at criticizing alternative spiritualities (Heelas 2008).

¹⁵¹ I acquired my copy of *The Power of Now* in New Delhi in 2008 from a self-avowed New Age seeker who I met in Gurumaa Ashram (but a seeker who actually followed Soka Gakai Buddhism). The inside cover lists the first Indian printing in 2001 and the *eighteenth reprint* (my emphasis!) in 2005. The original printing was in 1997 in Canada by Namaste Publishing, Inc. In 2008 and 2009, I saw *Eat, Pray, Love* all over the cities of New Delhi and Mumbai.

her discourses in CD and DVD media forms and when they watch her discourses for free on the Internet or on TV, they not only “consume” Hinduism, but also Buddhism, Sufism and Sikhism since Gurumaa draws on scriptural, folkloric and anecdotal sources from within each of these “isms,” and even from Christianity.

Universalism and democratization

Throughout her monograph Warriar demonstrates how Mata Amritanandamayi simultaneously espouses universalism and pluralism in her teachings. The Mata gives her followers “self-consciously modern” ritual prescriptions, practices chosen from among traditional Hindu rituals and revised to suit modern needs (2005: 51-56). Srinivas finds a similar trend of embracing universalism while remaining within the realm of Indic religiosity in the Sathya Sai Baba movement. She quotes Baba from the periodical *Sathya Sai Speaks* (SSS, Vol. II: 32-33): “this yearning [for Truth] has no connection with the land of your birth or the language spoken or the form of Divinity revered. It is the cry of humanity everywhere, at all times” (quoted in Srinivas 2008: 161).

In her analysis, Srinivas emphasizes Baba’s “ability to move from a construction of Indian culture involving universal values to an *inner* and philological reading of scriptural traditions, from an emphasis on Vedic truths to *pragmatic formulae*, from an insistence on cultural roots to a theosophical universalism,” and argues that this “embeds Baba’s philosophy within a specific social, cultural and historical context, and simultaneously allows spatial mobility” (2008: 161). In other words, modern gurus like Sathya Sai Baba and Mata Amritanandamayi (and many others, I would contend) do something very similar to what Hindi *sants* in Gold’s account did for their

constituencies and what Vivekananda did for his. The New Age gurus synthesize, adapt, re-frame, re-position and re-package for *their age*. In the process of embracing the *particularly* Indian and *universally* applicable, New Age gurus also redefine, and sometimes go beyond, boundaries to include new conversation partners, incorporate new ideas, *and* sometimes to include new adherents. And finally, they do all this without abandoning Indian spiritual heritage.

Disciples of New Age gurus may, in their turn, have multiple or hybrid religious *and* spiritual identities. Gurumaa wishes to remain outside of any one tradition, refusing to be “labeled” in terms of any “ism.” Yet, she still draws into her fold some followers who identify themselves as Hindu or Jain or Christian or Sikh, as well as some who refused to be labeled thus.¹⁵² And similarly, “Hindu” gurus like Mata Amritanandamayi, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Gurumayi Chidvilasananda attract followers from a vast array of traditions without expecting them to cast aside their religious identity. Mata Amritanandamayi commonly gives her American devotees “Christ” or “Buddha” or “Spirit” mantras. To borrow the language of scholars of New Religious Movements (NRM) and New Age spirituality – as well as from New Age self-help writers – many contemporary Indian gurus do provide “alternative spiritualities” in the neo-Hindu meditation and yoga movements that they offer to global constituencies today. These spiritualities may take varying positions vis-à-vis religion in defining the identities of gurus and disciples. Gurus’ teachings and devotional traditions may be grounded in Indian religiosity and at the same time speak to universal longings, as

¹⁵² This information comes from the author’s April 2008 field notes. Gurumaa told me “you won’t be able to fit me into any box” in answer to a question of her religious identity. However, she was also referring to a number of categories I proposed including “New Age Guru,” a wrinkle in the fabric. Scholars with their categories often ignore a guru’s own identification. Sri Aurobindo and J. Krishnamurti both refused to be called guru, but are considered as such by scholars anyway. Mother Meera is not a guru, but an avatar, yet scholars often discuss her as a guru. See for example (Cornille 2004).

Srinivas points out in her work. The “New Age smorgasbord,” of which Williamson writes in her American based study, would appear to be thriving in contemporary Indian urban markets in much the way it does in the West.

Regarding Indian gurus in America, Williamson emphasizes, “The Hindu gurus played their own part in the New Age vision, believing that their work in the West—and particularly in the United States—would help to bring it about” (2010: 51). Williamson offers pronouncements by the gurus themselves indicating their belief that they were ushering in a New Age: “Paramahansa Yogananda envisioned a new age in which there would be no division between East and West,” Maharishi Mahesh Yogi sought to establish an “Age of Enlightenment,” and Swami Muktananda spoke of initiating a “Meditation Revolution” (51). Gurus today follow the lead of these 20th century gurus and oftentimes see themselves in similar light.

One might surmise from the discussion thus far that the New Age guru speaks English. While this is often the case, it is not exclusively so. English is the medium key to spreading a guru’s message on a global platform, and therefore a guru not speaking English, like Mata Amritanandamayi (known variously as Amma, Ammachi, Mata) who speaks in the Indian vernacular language of Malayalam, must have the charisma to attract those who cannot understand her directly. And then, having an Anglophone and tech savvy cluster of disciple-volunteers to disseminate the message becomes crucial. Warriar notes how Mata Amritanandamayi’s devotees “were almost unanimous in deploring the highbrow, and jargon-rich discourses” and they preferred the Mata’s simple yet profound way of speaking (Warriar 2005: 72-73). Similarly, followers of Gurumaa have repeatedly cited to me their preference for her “modern” and “clear”

language (sometimes Hindi, sometimes English) over the Sanskritized Hindi of “older” gurus to whom their parents and grandparents listen. In both of these examples, “modern” language does not imply English as much as it does non-Sanskritic. It should also be noted, however, that gurus who speak Indian vernacular languages such as Malayalam or Hindi often do so with a sprinkling of English words. The lingua franca of New Age gurus, therefore, might be *any* language intelligible to their audiences. Their non-reliance on Sanskrit terms indicates a democratization of sorts. In this regard they are not unlike early medieval bhakti poet-saints who sang in Indian vernacular languages revolutionizing Hindu religious traditions by democratizing devotion across class and caste barriers.

Gurus: divine, realized and gendered

There exists a great deal of variance within guru traditions as to how the guru is regarded: some gurus are regarded as *avatars* (“incarnation”: literally, descended), divine beings who have come to earth with a mission; some are understood to be humans who have ascended to embody or manifest the divine; and others may be perceived, more simply perhaps, to be advanced enough on their spiritual journey to guide others. Within the fold of one guru, often many perceptions regarding the guru’s identity with or in relation to the divine exist. Mostly claims made about gurus come from disciples and not the guru, yet sometimes gurus do make their own lofty claims. Sathya Sai Baba made numerous statements identifying himself as an *avatar* (Babb 1986, 1987; Srinivas 2008). Mata Nirmala Devi publicly identified herself as an incarnation of Adi-Shakti, the Great Goddess (Coney 1999).¹⁵³ Typically, an *avatar’s* descent is

¹⁵³ Both Satya Sai Baba and Mata Nirmala Devi died in 2011, and both gurus lived well into their 80s.

understood to be related to his particular mission. Devotees of Sathya Sai Baba, probably the most famous of India's modern day holy men, viewed his role as more than that of a saint, even more than that of a *satguru*, but as "bhagavan (God)... who has come to earth to restore righteousness in a benighted era" (Babb 1987: 169). Similarly, Mata Amritanandamayi is widely regarded as an avatar-guru, as an incarnation of the Great Goddess, Devi, whose mission on earth is to share her love with humanity and alleviate human suffering. Alternatively, Gurumaa seems to stress her human-ness as a way to empower those around her to reach greater heights. In one of my early and private meetings with her, she very pointedly delivered the message to me that if she could do so, then I too could become a Buddha in this very lifetime .

Though admittedly a "non-institutional institution," gurudom has for the most part, remained a predominantly male institution (Erndl 2004). Despite the predominance of male gurus over the centuries, the contemporary age is witnessing a great increase of women in this conventionally male role. Karen Pechilis (2004) traces religio-historical evidence of women as gurus and saints throughout Indian history and distinguishes saints, such as *bhaktas*, and the wives of pandits and kings known for their exceptional spiritual powers, from gurus (Pechilis 2004). The history of women in religious roles in Hinduism, even roles of *sannyasinis*, can be speculative at best, but there has been *some* precedence of women who held spiritual, sometimes even scriptural, authority over men (Khandelwal 2004; Pechilis 2004). It has been more prevalent, historically and today, for men to hold spiritual and scriptural authority over women. In the present, the very existence of female gurus challenges the male-dominated tradition.

Perhaps the newest territory for female gurus today lies in their administrative oversight of the institutions established under their auspices. In this respect, Mata Amritanandamayi may be the first woman to run a religious institution as large as her Mata Amritanandamayi Mission and Trust (MAM). The MAM is probably as large in its humanitarian scope as is the Ramakrishna Mission established by Swami Vivekananda. Therefore, perhaps the newest and most powerful role for female gurus today is that implicit in their leadership of transnational religious organizations, missions, and trusts. In this regard, female gurus act much like CEOs in a powerful new role that goes beyond the role of spiritual guide—one requiring extensive travel to garner devotees and to oversee vast exchanges of global capital to support institutional endeavors. Thus an *avatar-guru* like Mata Amritanandamayi might be seen as Guru, Goddess and CEO.¹⁵⁴

“Worldly” Gurus

New Age gurus, like their 19th and 20th century predecessors who practiced “this worldly” asceticism (for instance Swami Vivekananda and his “practical Vedanta”) fully engage in the world, not least through the establishment of missions. There is an emergent body of literature that ties religion to the processes of globalization and describes the role of religion within the public sphere of our current age (Casanova 1997, 2001; Juergensmeyer 2005). Over a decade ago, Rudolph and Piscatori (1997) established the rising importance of transnational religion as a sector of transnational civil society. Transnational religious organizations bear many similarities to corporate organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the way they thrive in

¹⁵⁴ Here, I echo words of an informant to Hanna Kim’s study of BAPS Swaminarayan Hinduism. This informant described his guru, Pramukh Swami Maharaj, as “Guru, God and CFO” (Kim 2001).

this non-state space (Rudolph 2005). Increasingly, globalization has come to refer to an age that is “spatial” rather than “temporal,” and “global civil society” is a space in which nations will continue to be relevant, though imagined, and where “transnational identities, particularly religious ones, are likely to become ever more prominent” (Casanova 2001: 423,430). In global civil society “there are opportunities and obligations for religions to be global actors” (Thomas 2001: 525), whereby the roles of religious leaders have expanded to include diplomacy and humanitarianism as in the case of the “globalization of the papacy” (Casanova 1997). Engaged Buddhist leaders, evangelical Christian preachers and globetrotting gurus have adopted this model of social engagement in global civil society. Most websites of New Age gurus will include information regarding social service programs, humanitarian initiatives or the guru’s own involvement in world peace initiatives or the World Parliament of Religions. Here we see that the legacy of Swami Vivekananda has come to fruition among contemporary gurus (and not just those we may deem “New Age”). Even Gurumaa, who has explained to me that social service is not her “main gig,” twelve years ago initiated her organization’s Shakti NGO. In our first conversation in 2006, she identified her such social service as a “side dish,” yet one that is getting “very colorful.”

Scholarly studies too have focused on the spiritual practice (*sādhana*) of selfless service (*sevā*), and its new meanings for our current age (Beckerlegge 2000b; Warrior 2003). The guru’s mission can be seen as her own *sevā*, service to society. Following that logic, devotees often serve their gurus and thus practice their own *sevā* by participating in and financially supporting their guru’s service initiatives in the world. Such social engagement, particularly through humanitarian schemes, that is prevalent among New

Age Indian gurus and their followers, counters one of the main criticisms of New Age spirituality, that it is overly and exclusively focused on the (individual) self. Most gurus today, high profile or not, have some sort of social service initiative in action, and this is true of gurus we might call “New Age” as well as those we might call sectarian Hindu gurus. Contemporary Indian gurus and their missions administrate and financially support efforts to serve humanity through initiatives that range from soup kitchens to education for under-privileged children to high-tech hospitals and universities. Interestingly many of the institutional service initiatives of guru-led organizations resemble Christian missionary initiatives in the history of the subcontinent—not surprising when we regard the neo-Hindu gurus of the colonial era as predecessor models. More active involvement in the world also makes gurus more susceptible to scrutiny. Gurus’ establishment and maintenance of institutional forms and enterprises requires amassing a great deal of money from devotees, and institutions can become unwieldy, as they grow ever larger.

Guru scandals are nothing new in the New Age context, yet in an era where gurus’ institutions are global in scope, scandal can affect large numbers of disciples. The most common scandals among gurus, as with just about any religious organization, typically involve money and/or sexual impropriety. Few controversies relating to New Age gurus have surpassed in scale those surrounding Osho Rajneesh (Fox 2002). Aravamudan contends that Rajneesh’s appeal came “from his relentlessly anti-institutional and anti-normative teachings” espoused in his “countercultural cosmopolitanism” (2006: 251). Rajneesh saw himself as a revolutionary mystic. And in many ways, he was quintessentially New Age. He incorporated modern Western

thinkers into his teachings, impressing audiences both at home in India and abroad with his erudition and scope. And it should be noted that posthumously, he is even more popular (in India, at least) than he was in his hey day as attested by the number of newly established Osho bookstores in Indian cities. Other contemporary gurus, whose organizations have been plagued with similar intrigue and “bad press,” yet continue to thrive, are Swami Muktananda and Sathya Sai Baba.¹⁵⁵

Even in earlier Indian contexts, skepticism about false sadhus and false gurus has always existed. Indeed New Age gurus’ own words are replete with warnings against false gurus, sometimes deploring the very idea of “gurudom.” In Kirin Narayan’s now classic study of folktales told by a contemporary guru in Maharashtra, she explains how “Swamiji’s” stories of false gurus and gullible disciples were “recast to address the historical moment” in which the gurus “charged exorbitant fees for initiation” and claimed “to have a ‘modern’ message, representing themselves as ‘scientists’ who will usher in a ‘new age’” (Narayan 1989: 157). Thus, in Swamiji’s renditions, we see evidence of the New Age in which “Spirituality becomes a commodity that can be bought and sold. And at the forefront of the buyers are foreign disciples” (Narayan

¹⁵⁵ For more information regarding Swami Muktananda’s alleged sexual impropriety in a scholarly account from a once-insider, see (Caldwell 2001). For an earlier account, see the article from *The New Yorker* (Harris 1994). For many years, the Indian popular press has been replete with injunctions against Sathya Sai Baba (and his death has brought even more). Indeed some of the New Age gurus’ staunchest critics can be found in Indian journalism. And as one might imagine, criticism abounds on the Internet from ex-members of many organizations. See (Urban 2003) for accounts of sexual scandal among Eastern spiritual teachers, including Swami Muktananda, and for his criticism of Western scholars’ entanglements in Tantra, including a strong criticism against the insider-scholar history and theology of Siddha Yoga (Brooks 1997), which failed to openly address Swami Muktananda’s alleged sexual exploits. It should be noted, however, that the Siddha scholars’ agenda to write a “theology” of the movement in which they were a part was transparent. Despite the volume’s “faults” named by Urban and others, the scholars painstakingly and convincingly demonstrate continuity between the teachings of the very modern gurus in the Siddha lineage and well-recognized and quite ancient streams of Indian philosophical traditions. As for insider versus outsider scholarship on gurus, interestingly, Lola Williamson’s recent work discussed above (2010) simultaneously straddles both perspectives; Williamson had participated in the past in both TM and Siddha Yoga, two of the three HIMMs she studies.

1989: 157). Indeed it is in the marketing of New Age products, ranging from intensive retreats and yoga camps (*shivirs*) modeled on the Western corporate “seminar” or “workshop” to meditation CDs, prayer beads as well as artifacts designed for child-devotees such as “Amma dolls,” that gurus and their “workaday charismatic-corporate entrepreneurship ” (Aravamudan 2006: 257) most often attract criticism from skeptics.

Conclusion

When we include Indian gurus in the scholarly conversations of New Age religion, we are no longer talking about New Age as the Western appropriation and co-option of select aspects of Eastern religion—we are talking about an *interpenetration* of religious and cultural ideas. As contemporary Indian gurus gain exposure to religious ideas “new” to them and begin to speak to “new” audiences in a language and rhetoric that those audiences can comprehend, their “potential canons” may expand.¹⁵⁶ Once a guru acknowledges and incorporates new ideas into her own repertoire, then canon – albeit a flexible one – is created. Like the *sants*, New Age gurus today offer to spiritual seekers revisions, innovations and even alternatives to inherited traditions. Some of the most famous of the *sants* were firebrand teachers, scathing in their views of tradition and status quo. I do not contend that *all* New Age gurus challenge the status quo with their teachings or even with the makeup of their followers. Indeed, we could argue that many of them appear entirely comfortable with the status quo – relying on capitalist and consumerist values and practices to woo moneyed spiritual seekers. Yet, might we also

¹⁵⁶ I borrow Douglas Renfrew Brooks’ use of “potential canon” to describe “those sources that the gurus might well choose.” Potential canon also acknowledges a guru’s “dynamic presence” and points beyond the scriptures themselves to include the guru’s own experience, or rather “the guiding forces that inform the Siddha guru’s experience” (Brooks 1997: 302).

see the loose conglomerate of New Age gurus as a sort of “counter-tradition” transcending religious categories? Some like Gurumaa do speak out strongly against particular social injustices of their age and some do much to try and alleviate suffering in humanity as in the case of Mata Amritanandamayi with her complex collection of social service initiatives. And some New Age gurus, in their universal appeal and their embrace of non-Indian devotees, challenge deeply held ideas of religious identity, ethnicity and birthright.

CHAPTER 4
A Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi, Sikh TV Guru

Introduction

In Spring 2008 in the Sonapat district of Haryana, Anandmurti Gurumaa sat regally upon an elaborate stage created for the dual celebratory events of her 42nd birthday (April 8) and her *sannyas diwas* (April 11), the anniversary day (*diwas*) of her renunciation (*sannyās*) signified here by a name most commonly associated with “Hindu” asceticism. Gurumaa’s senior-most disciple created the stage for her, which had a different incarnation for each of the two evening events. The architectural structure remained the same. On the night of Gurumaa’s birthday, when various classical Indian musicians performed for her and 3,000 or so guests sitting in the audience, the spaces on the stage’s backdrop were fitted with Hindu symbols; Lord Krishna dominated center stage playing his flute, flanked by arches on either side with the large Sanskrit syllable, AUM. On the night of Gurumaa’s *sannyas diwas*, when quawali singers performed for an even larger crowd at what one might presume would be a “Hindu” celebration, the Krishna and AUM decorations were replaced with screens created to look like Mughal geometric latticework. As the stage was being disassembled the following day, I noted to one of Gurumaa’s senior-most disciples that the naked base structure strangely resembled a mosque, mandir and *gurdwara*. She replied, “yes, and it also looks like none of them!”

At this time, I had been residing for over two months as a scholar in Gurumaa Ashram, and I had been observing Gurumaa both in the field and through her media long enough to know that the “spirituality” she teaches draws from multiple religious

traditions.¹⁵⁷ From her media representation, alone, I knew that Gurumaa had been born a Sikh, educated in a Catholic convent school, found her enlightenment in Vrindavan, and that she sometimes referred to herself as a Buddha and sometimes as a Sufi. But up until the very end of my first fieldwork stint in her ashram, I had been caught in the scholarly game of classification, trying to pinpoint this woman. Finally, I addressed a formal query to Gurumaa, which caused her to laugh at me publicly. I should have known better. In fact, I had already given up identifying her strongly with one or another religious tradition; she told me face to face very early during my tenure in her ashram that she refused any such identification with an “ism.” Regardless, my analytical training prevailed and I still wanted to know how she saw herself, or perhaps, more importantly, how her followers—who themselves, I presumed, may have more difficulty transcending particular religious identities—would identify their master if they absolutely had to check one box. Would she be identified with any one religion or creed? Would she be considered, rather, a New Age guru? A meditation guru? A feminist guru? A TV Guru? Her boisterous laugh turned gentle as she responded to my ridiculous question, “You are not going to be able to put me in any box; I’ll keep you guessing!”

Anandmurti Gurumaa's teachings, as well as her persona and media image, are situated at the intersection of Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi and Sikh mystical traditions. This TV guru (having since dropped her ochre *sannyās* attire), like the amorphous stage elaborately decorated to look like a temple one night and a mosque on another, adorns

¹⁵⁷ I utilize the vague descriptor, spirituality, in the way I heard it used in the fieldwork research context, as an indicator of boundary-less religiosity. Sometimes I heard the English gloss “spirituality,” even in Hindi conversation, but just as often, I heard the Hindi word *adhyātmik*, which literally means having to do with the supreme (*adhi*) spirit (*ātma*).

the physical body in different ways at different times, modeling idiosyncratic sartorial styles of religiosity and beauty that may look somewhat akin to styles Hindu or Muslim or Sikh and yet also like none of them.

This chapter examines the style of pluralism modeled by Gurumaa to her ever-expanding audience, exploring the notion that she draws from many classifiable “isms,” and yet remains difficult to place in any one of them. The stage, as a metaphor for the guru’s body, offers another angle from which to consider my first Indian American interlocutor’s description of Gurumaa as “all-in-one guru.” In both India and abroad, Gurumaa appeals to an educated class of urbanites who think of traditional “religion” as a limiting boundary in a globalizing world of “spiritual” possibilities. Regardless, Gurumaa’s appeal to these followers lies precisely in her ability to acknowledge tradition in an intelligent way—especially the heritage of Indian spiritual expertise—while at the same time to make innovations (as she put it to me) pertinent to “a new audience in a new time.” Thus, while Gurumaa models pluralism, it is naturally pluralism limited to some degree by the particularities of her physically manifest form and the audience attracted to the form.

What I refer to as the “pluralism” embodied by Gurumaa, loosely ties together disparate yet related notions that scholars have labeled variously: hybrid religious identity, religious plurality, religious syncretism or religious liminality (Das 1999; Madan 2003; Mayaram 2004; Oberoi 1994). This pluralism is held in contrast to the more politicized conceptions of pluralism as a virtue of civil society. Even as the boundaries of civil society expand from local to global proportions, pluralism as a political reality remains rooted in particular settings. This chapter offers the idea that the more

ephemeral pluralism embodied by individuals such as Gurumaa who seemingly move freely between cities, cultures and nation states—even religious identities—is likewise rooted in particularities, even while it evokes universality.

Following Mayaram, I take as my starting point the understanding that within the theologies of many “World Religions” (or “isms” according to Gurumaa), the “syncretic” is “constitutive” (Mayaram 2004: 30). Thus, I offer a narrative of Gurumaa’s pluralism from the perspective that the syncretic and liminal can and do exist within mainstream traditions themselves, are often inherent to them, and have sometimes been essential to their origins.¹⁵⁸ Such a perspective is one way to approach the scholarly “problem” of contemporary sages like Gurumaa who refuse to be labeled. Such a perspective also allows us to examine the insider’s view held by many of Gurumaa’s devotees: that Gurumaa’s profound state of Self-realization places her above bounded categories we use to make sense of our world. Additionally, this perspective of inherent plurality, especially in Indic religiosity, allows us to see “religion” and “tradition” as bounded entities that nonetheless already hold within themselves the tension of continuity and change. The Sikh religious tradition, into which Gurumaa was born, provides one starting point from which to examine inherent plurality as well as the tension of continuity and change.¹⁵⁹ In the case of Gurumaa, we might ask, what does it mean that this New Age TV guru’s affinities lie with founders and luminaries from multiple traditions? Or, that she is equally comfortable giving commentary on

¹⁵⁸ Having established the multivalence of the words “Tradition, pluralism and identity” in her introductory essay to the volume by the same name, Veena Das bring forth a question, “[I]s pluralism something external to tradition, or something internal to it?” (Das 1999: 9).

¹⁵⁹ For a nuanced study of the pluralistic worldview from which the Sikh tradition emerged and that it continued to embrace during its early history, see Oberoi (1994).

See also Mayaram (2004: 31-32). She writes, “Asian religions did not stress singularization that was associated with the institutional framework of Christianity and the idea of heresy” (32). Mayaram also mentions the “so-called New Age Religion of the west” as producing syncretic combinations (31).

textual sources considered “Hindu” such as *Bhagavad Gita* as she is offering commentary on *Adi Granth*? What does it mean that Gurumaa’s style of dress, singing, speaking, as well as spiritual practices she prescribes for her disciples are all somewhat of an eclectic mix of Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi and Sikh?

Gurumaa often speaks against religious boundaries and this chapter will note some of these instances. The rhetoric of expansive spirituality as opposed to bounded, restricted, religion itself is nothing new, either in the case of Gurumaa’s speech, or to other global Indian gurus of the 20th and 21st centuries, or even to Indian gurus and holy men of centuries (and ages) past. Indeed, Gurumaa’s own words on this subject, in a sense, follow a “tradition” in India of resistance to bounded religiosity during periods of complex intercultural exchange.¹⁶⁰ Herein, the primary concern lies in how Gurumaa fashions a certain type of pluralism through her very body, or rather, to employ language closer to the traditions from which she draws, through “the body” or physical frame in its entirety, even in its particularity, in a larger sense, her physical form (*rūpa*). It has been common practice in India for Self-realized gurus to reflexively refer to themselves in the third person as “this body.” Referring to one’s own person as “this body” not only “others” the body, but it also specifically indicates one’s present and particularly manifest form of this lifetime; it would differ in another and another and another. Moreover, the guru’s *rūpa* is a teaching in and of itself to the seeker on the path of *guru-bhakti*.

¹⁶⁰ The previous chapter of this thesis made the argument that New Age gurus and their innovations follow a pattern of Indic boundary crossing, argued also at (Rudert 2010). For other arguments that complex intercultural exchange can provide the setting for syncretic religiosity see also: (Gold 1987a; Mayaram 2004).

As a place of pluralism, let us expand our understanding of Anandmurti Gurumaa's body to include the mind-body complex and the particularities of this human form. Therefore, personal narrative and biographical complexities are part of Gurumaa's *rūpa*. It is significant that she was born into a particular female body at a particular place in a particular time and that she encountered various particular religious traditions in the ways that she did. All of these vectors come together as part of her physically manifest form. And that *rūpa*, in its fullness, includes the voice, the beauty, the humor, the history, the pluralism, and the loyalties to Indic religiosities. And it is that embodiment which attracts a particular audience of people to the teachings and to the spiritual journey. That form, in its expansiveness, also has its own limitations. As the body becomes in a sense global and reflects a certain type of pluralism, it nonetheless remains a body situated in a particular place and time and gendered form.

Body as place, body as stage

In 2006, in a public discourse recorded in London (now made available to a larger audience on DVD) Gurumaa sings the Punjabi verse of Sultan Bahu, a 17th century Sufi *faqir*, who sang in the mother-tongue and was revered by Sikh and Hindu Punjabis as well as Muslims: "The master (*murshid*) is the gate of the Ka'ba where the lovers go to offer their salutations . . . Why go to Mecca and Medina when the Hajj is happening in my own home?"¹⁶¹ After singing these lyrics, Gurumaa tells her audience that Bulleh

¹⁶¹ Gurumaa sings the Punjabi verse in the London recording: *Dar murshid da khana ka'ba / Jithe Āshiq Sajde Karde Hu . . .* "A similar version of the song can be found in Jamal J. Elias's work on Sultan Bahu (1998: 110). *Faqir*, meaning beggar, was a self-description of Sufi mystic poets. The word *ghar*, translated here as home, can also be a metaphor for the heart in Sufi poetry.

Shah, another Punjabi Sufi from the following century, perfectly lived these words of Sultan Bahu, and she illustrates this with a tale of Bulleh Shah preparing his family for making the Hajj.¹⁶² To the great surprise of those in Bulleh's circle he took them nearby to the place none other than his master's home, and upon arrival circumambulated his master 10 times saying, "See, I have done 10 Hajj!" After telling this story, Gurumaa asks her audience, "So, who is a truly religious person?" and answers her own question:

It is not the one who goes for pilgrimages. It's not the one who goes for *Hajj*, not the one who goes to Harmandir Sahib, it's not the one who goes to Kashi.... It's not the one who goes to synagogue, but it is the one who goes and visits the inner shrine of his own heart. Any *fool* can go to a temple!¹⁶³

Gurumaa half-jokingly explains that nowadays no one has to leave the comfort of UK to go to places of pilgrimage anyway; they can just send someone else and receive part of the merit for their ritual. *Well, if you are Hindu, she muses, then you would receive full credit since this practice of having someone else do your ritual for you has been in existence for centuries.*

With her story of the master as the door to the *ka'ba*, and circumambulation of the master as Hajj, Gurumaa illustrates the notion of the human master as the personification or perfect manifestation of Divine Love. In recognizing a door to divinity in the human form of the guru, and entering that door through devotion to the guru, one realizes that the same love exists within one's own body, one's own temple.

Over and again, Gurumaa explains to her audience, "The body is the temple of God. If you want to find God, just go within." In this, she is not saying anything new, nor is she

¹⁶² For more poetry in translation from both of these Punjabi Sufi poet-singers (both independently referred to as "Rumi of Punjab") see also Mustansir Mir (1995).

¹⁶³ *Amrit Varsha*, discourse. London: 30 April 2006). The word "fool" in italics was emphatically stressed in the spoken words, thus italicized here. Harmandir Sahib is another name for the Golden Temple of the Sikhs in Amritsar. Kashi is one of three commonly used names for the city of Banaras (also Varanasi), pilgrimage place of the Hindus. Hajj is the name of the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina.

offering an idea unique to Indian spirituality.¹⁶⁴ From within numerous traditions, teachers and scriptural teachings have idealized mystic union over and above the ritualized performance of religion. Indeed to make this clearer to me, she emphasized Jesus' teaching that the Kingdom of God exists within the heart and is available to all. In sharing this ideal through Sufi song of Sultan Bahu, Gurumaa offers her mostly non-Muslim audience a sense of the mystic spiritual path's universality in language much beloved to many of them, Punjabi.

So why make a pilgrimage to those external places, Gurumaa asks, when you could be making the pilgrimage to the inner shrine of your own heart? In the context of north Indian spirituality, one common way to access this "inner shrine" is through devotion and surrender to a master who embodies mystic union. The name Anandmurti Gurumaa itself tells us that in addition to being a "Master mother" (*Guru-Maa*), devotees find this woman to be an "idol" or perfect manifestation (*mūrti*) of "bliss" (*ānand*). As perfect manifestation, the guru's body—as shrine—exemplifies the expression of the divinity existing within the human form in a way perhaps more tangible to the devotee than does the external shrine to which he might make pilgrimage. In the example of Bulleh Shah, who rouses his entire family for the Hajj, the master's body serves as both the paradigm of divine union and the place of pilgrimage, thus for the seeker (or for those in Bulleh's circle) God becomes more accessible at multiple levels. Even if the disciple does not circumambulate the master's form or even see the master as a doorway to divinity, she may nonetheless see the guru—in word and as well as in form—as a hub in a vast network in the global conversation on religion and spirituality. Many

¹⁶⁴ The phrase "temple of god" was used at least as early as 12th century. Basavarāja, founder of the Virashaiva movement, wrote: "those who have riches build temples for Thee; what shall I build? I am poor. My legs are the pillars; this body of mine is the temple" (Raghavan 1958: 357).

in Gurumaa's audience learn much of what they know of other peoples' religions from Gurumaa. A number of Gurumaa's audience members with whom I spoke expressed to me an appreciation for what they understood to be her vast knowledge of "all religions."

Gurumaa was born in Amritsar, Punjab in 1966 to "hair-keeping" (*kesdhari*) Sikh parents who gave her the name Gurpreet Kaur Grover. Devotees of Gurumaa have described their guru's parents as having been "devout" and "pure-hearted" and have qualified their Sikhism as being "open-minded" and "spiritual" Sikhism. Asked for elucidation of these descriptions, informants explained that during her childhood Gurumaa's parents were devout and observed Sikh traditions, but also celebrated and honored other religious traditions as well. While wearing the bodily signs of their Sikh faith by keeping their hair uncut, they were also understood to have been "saint lovers." I heard this English expression "saint lover" used in many instances in the ethnographic context to depict someone for whom the love of being with saints trumped any particular tradition from which that saint might come. Therefore, Gurumaa's parents (particularly her mother) were saint lovers, because they welcomed into their home "saints" (quite fluidly defined here as holy people, lovers of God) from various traditions.¹⁶⁵ When I visited Gurumaa's Amritsar family home in 2009, just over four decades after her birth, I noticed not only pictures of Guru Nanak and Guru Govind Singh hanging on the walls of the home but also pictures of Radha and Krishna, and

¹⁶⁵ It bears mentioning that the word "saint" is not used without some complications in the Indian context. It is not an indigenous term and not a fully adequate translation for the Indic term "sant." Saint in the specific sense implies a vetting process not utilized in the world of Indian sants. I found my conversation partners in fieldwork to use the term with a more universal flavor to it, without any association with a particular tradition, institution or vetting system. The sant tradition, rather, implies some level of synchronicity as well as non-conformity. On the sant tradition of India, see Gold (1987) as well as Schomer and McLeod (1987).

interestingly, familiar photographs of Anandmurti Gurumaa that I had seen sold in Gurumaa Ashram for devotional purposes (darshan).

Gurpreet Kaur willingly became her mother's regular sidekick, attending the teachings of a local "Maharaj ji," a man described to me in retrospect by Prema, from Amritsar, as Gurumaa's "gyān guru." Maharaj ji, as Gurumaa herself refers to him in later years, was a local teacher (*giani*) in the little discussed Nirmala Sant tradition, an ascetic-leaning, syncretistic order within the larger more outwardly householder-oriented Sikh religion.¹⁶⁶ Maharaj ji had been the student of an internationally known guru of Ambala, Haryana, named Sant Dalel Singh, who would later become Gurumaa's own beloved "divine Teacher" (*Gurudev*) as well as the guru who would bless the ochre clothes that she wore for many years as a sign of her renunciation (*sannyās*).¹⁶⁷

Stories have it that seers who came to Gurpreet's home to accept her mother's loving service (*sevā*) as they passed through town, were awed by this girl child's spiritual aptitude. Gurpreet's parents chose to offer her English medium education in a local convent school, where she reputedly impressed her missionary teachers too with her scope of religious knowledge—to the point where they wished to convert her and put her to work in Catholic missions. Alas, her parents refused to give her up.¹⁶⁸

However, this early event foreshadows a similar told event when Sikhs and Hindus in

¹⁶⁶ Understudied groups like Nirmala and Udasi orders continue to thrive and serve within the larger Sikh population of north India. For a lucid and empirical study of the syncretism within Sikh tradition, see Oberoi (1994).

¹⁶⁷ For Prema, "*gyān guru*" became a way of distinguishing for me between Maharaj ji and Sant Dalel Singh. In her mind, the relationship between Gurumaa and the first guru from childhood was a relationship of knowledge (*gyān*), while the latter teacher, Dalel Singh, was the one with whom Gurumaa had the stronger heart connection. I asked my storyteller which one of the two teachers is the "divine Teacher" (*Gurudev*) in Gurumaa's songs. It was this storyteller's understanding that it was Dalel Singh "who passed something" to Gurumaa, implying, it was in relationship with this guru that Gurumaa received experiential knowledge—a different sort of transmission. This is, however, one person's understanding and that understanding was expressed in response to my own questions about these two men significant in Gurumaa's spiritually formative years.

¹⁶⁸ This story is a prevalent one in Gurumaa's internally published Internet and print media.

Kanpur would fight over Gurumaa, each wishing she would choose to promote one religious tradition or the other and not speak one night in a *gurdwara* and the next in a *mandir* (Gurumaa 2010: 35-37). I heard another story later from devotees who explained to me that a famous Sikh TV *giani* had similarly tried to convince Gurumaa to speak solely for the Sikhs, promising name and fame, but that she refused any such alignment with an “ism.”¹⁶⁹ Prema told yet another story of Gurumaa’s recruitment by Sikh officials and her response, “Why teach the truth to only Sikhs? Why put boundaries on the truth?”

In her later teens, Gurpreet Kaur left home alone on a north Indian pilgrimage for a number of years. This journey included visits to pilgrimage sites of various traditions, but its main objective, as Gurumaa explained to Charpentier in an interview, was to commune with and seek companionship of “like-minded” people “and [she] was therefore always roaming about in religious congregations where various sages, sadhus, and mahatmas—‘those hidden friends who have tasted the nectar were sitting’” (Charpentier 2010: 79). This affinity Gurumaa feels with “like-minded” souls plays out today in the friendships she maintains with Buddhist leaders as well as Hindu yogis and Turkish Sufis, people who have likewise “tasted the nectar” and thereby demonstrates a certain pluralistic theology in which mystical union or spiritual attainment and cultivation of oneself trumps religious difference.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ It should be noted that Gurumaa’s earliest tours to America seem to have been organized through Sikh networks because most of her early visits were to *gurdwaras*. Her organizers are now instructed to secure locations not tied to particular religious traditions. I listened as Gurumaa’s Right Hand Man gave instructions to Nagpur devotees to move their regular meeting place for group meditation and satsang from the home of the group’s leader to a more neutral spot, so that caste and religious boundaries would not be a consideration for those who wanted to participate.

¹⁷⁰ The Karmapa, Tibetan Buddhist lama of the Kagyu lineage, visited Gurumaa Ashram in 2009 with a vibrantly colorful and devotional welcome. He is understood to be a special friend, and Gurumaa also meets him in Delhi and Dharamsala when her schedule permits. At the GPIW (Global Peace Initiative for Women) in Jaipur, Gurumaa reconnected with some Buddhist nuns she had known from early years in

Returning to Amritsar, Gurpreet, at this time wearing all white, accepted the name Swami ji from the small but growing crowd of Hindus and Sikhs (with occasional Muslims and Christians) who would participate in gatherings (*satsang*) she offered, sometimes in homes and sometimes in *gurdwaras*. In the songs she sang and teachings she gave, she offered a taste of her own eclectic bhakti. This pluralistic devotion was grounded not only in the teachings from the Sikh holy book, *Adi-Granth* (already a vast and somewhat pluralistic slice of history with Word—*shabad*—from the early Sikh gurus as well as non-Sikh “devotees”), but also a wider variety of songs and stories including those of Punjabi Sufis and north Indian *sants*. Partial it seems to the *sant* tradition of her region; Gurumaa’s early-recorded repertoire includes not only songs of Nanak, Kabir and Ravidas (all also in the *Adi-Granth*), but also songs of Paltu and Sahajo Bai, usually classified as Hindu, and songs of Sultan Bahu and Bulleh Shah, Muslim Sufis. Additionally, it seems that anything she encountered and found personally inspiring she included in her personal canon of inspiration and shared with her audience, such as the Vedantic verses attributed to Adi Shankaracharya. Many years later, in her early forties, she would add Rumi to the list of poet singers whose verses she would put to music and whose stories she would tell.¹⁷¹ Gurumaa’s translation of Rumi’s Persian verses into her own audience’s language, Hindi, parallel’s Nanak’s translation of Kabir’s songs into Punjabi for his own listening audience.

Gurumaa’s discourses have always included stories from traditions outside of those most familiar to her audience, even beyond the most familiar Hindu, Sikh and

her teaching career. Likewise, Gurumaa has shared her stories of spending time with Sufis in Turkey, where she did not know the language, but communicated with the help of translators and in the language of Love.

¹⁷¹ Douglas Renfrew Brooks, who writes about the guru as “living canon,” also explains that guru-based traditions often do not follow sectarian philosophy, drawing, rather, from “inclusive canons” (Brooks 1997: 286).

Muslim. Thus she weaves into her teachings the tales of Zen masters, narratives from Buddhist sutras and Christian gospels as well as the stories of Vedic rishis and vernacular poet-singers from all over the Indian subcontinent, if mostly from north India.¹⁷² Hers seems to be an ever-expanding repertoire of song and story. It is not as if her audience has not been introduced before to figures like Buddha or Shankara or Jesus or Nanak or Kabir, but they may not have heard about all of these figures from one source, from one hub. By introducing personalities—who themselves are often religiously hybrid—from multiple traditions into the conversation, Gurumaa performs a type of pluralism not so unlike that of her *sant* and Sikh guru predecessors in north India. As Gurumaa explained to her audience in Florida in 2008, Guru Nanak introduced Kabir his to Punjabi fellows. He shared Kabir’s verses, with which he had felt affinity, in a way that they could understand, and in doing so “he made a linguistic and cultural translation” for his audience.¹⁷³ Gurumaa offers a similar service today as she introduces to Hindi speakers—and to her Hindu listeners—Guru Nanak’s verses, singing them in the original Punjabi, but translating and explaining their significance to her audience in Hindi (and sometimes in English).

Similarly, as she continues to expand her own canon, Gurumaa introduces not only verses and stories but also spiritual practices from various traditions to her listeners. My Amritsar storyteller, born a Sikh, told me she never would have known the beauty of the practice of *zikr* had it not been for Gurumaa introducing her to it. She knew of the practice, but only because of Gurumaa, she tried it and understood its devotional potency as well as its similarities to the Sikh practice of repetition of the

¹⁷² Brooks writes: “gurus may cross doctrinal, historical, region, linguistic, and social boundaries to make their points” (1997: 286).

¹⁷³ Meditation Camp (*shivir*), Melbourne, Florida. 25 January 2008.

name of God (*nām jap*). Gurumaa emphasizes to her listeners that they should try to substitute other names of the Almighty besides the ones they are most accustomed to.

Little is known of Gurumaa's short history with her guru, Sant Dalel Singh, the Nirmala sant whose almost life-size portrait hangs just above the head of Lord Shiva's *mūrti* in the ashram temple.¹⁷⁴ When I asked about her relationship with her guru, Gurumaa explained to me that she probably spent less than six hours total in his presence. She further explained that when he gave her *sannyās*, this act was far from any rituals I might associate with the formalized taking of *sannyās*. This Sikh "guru" of the Nirmala sant order did not initiate his disciples into renunciation, often referred to as "giving *sannyās*," though people did come to live an ascetic lifestyle in his ashram.¹⁷⁵

One day Gurumaa (then known as Swamiji, wearing white) visited Dalel Singh's ashram carrying in her handbag the ochre clothes she intended to wear henceforth.¹⁷⁶ At the opportune moment, she asked the sant to bless them for her *sannyas*.¹⁷⁷ His response was an affirmation, "But you are already *brahmanishta* [established in Brahman, Supreme Consciousness]. What do you need the clothes for?" I just want

¹⁷⁴ The primary image (*mūrti*) in Gurumaa Ashram's mandir is Lord Shiva as God of yoga (*yogeshwari*) seated in lotus posture. There is also a small Durga *mūrti* inside the small octagonal shaped ashram mandir as well as nearly life-sized images of Siddhartha Buddha etched onto the outside of the mandir's eight glass walls.

¹⁷⁵ I put the word "guru" here in quotations because according to the Sikh tradition, once Guru Govind Singh established the Khalsa (the body of the Sikh community), there would be no more human gurus in the Sikh tradition. The guru would be the holy book (Adi-Granth), the community of Sikhs (Khalsa) and the formless Almighty (Waheguru).

¹⁷⁶ Gurumaa's explanation to me above, as well as the brief story told in this paragraph, is my retelling of her response to my question in a small ashram *darshan* session.

¹⁷⁷ The opportune moment happened to be in the moment during which the sant's chief disciple had left the room. Gurumaa explained that Dalel Singh's chief disciple never seemed to like her. Likewise, in more recent years, Gurumaa has expressed her concern over the way that the ashram has become sex-segregated since her master's death, presumably the chief disciple-cum master's doing. Gurumaa's expression of disapproval of the sex-segregation furthers an ongoing point she was making with me about masters and disciples, that disciples (with lesser minds) often just don't fully comprehend their master's teachings. They can only understand as their limited capacities allow.

Gurumaa also explained that after having her renunciation clothes blessed, Gurumaa quickly fled the ashram, avoiding the scrutiny of the chief disciple who always felt threatened by her.

them, she replied. So he took the clothes and then handed them back to her in a gesture she took as a blessing. The birthday of the Hindu Lord Ram was coming up in just a couple of days, so instead of putting the clothes on right away, she and her long time companion, known today as her Right Hand Man left by car for Haridwar and Rishikesh, where she dressed the body in the ochre robes the first time on the bank of the Ganga on the occasion of the birthday of Lord Ram.

Exactly how many years Gurumaa wore the ochre clothes blessed by Dalel Singh, I cannot say. It should be noted that the color she chose is a color worn commonly, not only by Hindu renunciators (*sannyāsin*) but also by Nirmala Sikhs, and Dalel Singh himself. Years later, even after she quit the robes, Gurumaa continued to wear the color, albeit, in fashionable saris and Punjabi suits (*salwār kamīz*). Understood by devotees to be empowered by her own self-freedom (*svatantra*) and perhaps on some level too by her guru's words that she didn't need the robes, Gurumaa is a woman who has taken her *sannyās* "forcefully" and "in her very own style" as a full time resident of Gurumaa Ashram once put it to me. Indeed, she took what she calls her *sannyās* from a Nirmala Sikh whom she regards as Gurudev, and she dressed herself for the first time in these clothes in a Hindu pilgrimage site. Years later, celebrating that event, the songs sung for her by performers were songs to Allah, and the stage upon which she sat resembled a mosque.

Through singing songs, through telling of stories, through acts of translation, and even through idiosyncratic adornment of the body, Gurumaa echoes her "like-minded" friend Guru Nanak. The revered stories of Nanak's life (*janam sakhis*) tell us that after his three-day immersion in the Bein River, Nanak announced to those who

would listen, “There is no Hindu. There is no Muslim,” and afterward incorporated sartorial styles from each of those traditions into his own dress.¹⁷⁸ In her own way and for her own audience, Gurumaa has fashioned a mode of renunciation that we might call not Hindu, not Muslim, and not Sikh. At the same time, she does sometimes appear to be a little like each of these.

These days, Gurumaa explained to me, she dresses according to her “moods.” She changes the color and mode of her vestige when she feels like it. Sometimes she wears a sari, sometimes a Punjabi suit. Sometimes she wears a floor length knit sweater dress. She very often wears shades of orange, ochre, or saffron, and though fashionable, still reflecting through color something of a Hindu vision of renunciation. She explained to me once that when she feels like a Sufi, she wears black, which left me wondering if she was feeling like a Punjabi housewife on those occasions when she wore pink *salwār* suits.¹⁷⁹ Gurumaa wears varying forehead marks, and most notably, one I find strikingly different from all others, a long narrow vertical line directly down the length of her forehead. Once I took the opportunity to ask about these forehead marks: “Are they symbolic of something? Or are they according to your mood?” (Referring back to our earlier conversation). She answered, “There is so much meaning in everything and yet every thing is meaning less.” I refrained from asking questions about her appearance after that, realizing how petty she found them.

Nonetheless, for two years, I kept noting in my fieldwork journal whatever color and style of attire Gurumaa would wear at each and every event I attended or watched recordings of—until the day I watched the aforementioned London discourse from 2006.

¹⁷⁸ For two different versions of this story, see W. H. McLeod (1984: 21-22).

¹⁷⁹ Private conversation in Gurumaa Ashram February 10, 2008.

During this discourse, Gurumaa tells the story of a devotee who had (presumably sometime earlier and not that day) demonstrated interest in the earrings she was wearing. She disparages this unnamed person for getting caught up in the external manifestation of beauty, though she jests, “I *am* a beauty lover” and “indeed, this body is a good one!” (*emphasis* in Gurumaa’s spoken word). Gurumaa further asserts that she dresses herself with “great intention” because it helps her to sort out her “real listeners” from those who will be concerned with what she is wearing. She likened these “child like” listeners concerned with outward appearances to the sorts of narrow minded followers of “tradition” who would go to the *gurdwara* or to the mosque or to the temple or church to find God, when in actuality, God is right there within the shrine of their very hearts. Next she tells a humorous story about an Indian American woman who visited the most amazing museum in New York City only to overlook the rich historical and cultural artifacts from all over the globe and instead ask her guide, “How do you get your marble floors so shiny?”

To the casual observer or listener, Gurumaa will not only look like a Hindu one day and like a Sikh the next, but will also sound like a Hindu one day and sound like a Sikh the next. One disciple explained: “When Gurumaa talks on Sufism, she becomes a Sufi. When Gurumaa talks about Nanak, she becomes Nanak. When Gurumaa talks about Krishna, she becomes Krishna. She becomes everything for me!” But just about as soon as one might begin to classify Gurumaa as one of these, she will suddenly appear looking like and singing something quite different. For instance, a non-devotee scholar from Delhi happened upon Gurumaa’s *Amrit Varsha* program on Sony TV and thought her expositions and singing of Kabir so true to tradition and linguistic style, that he

took her to be a native Hindi speaker from the Kabir's own region, Uttar Pradesh. Gurumaa's television program, *Amrit Varsha*, because it is produced directly from her discourses all over the globe, includes words spoken and songs sung to varying groups of immediate physical audiences in particular places. In its satellite television medium and now especially in its Internet medium, *Amrit Varsha* has a potentially limitless audience. Had my colleague watched Sony TV at any other time, he might have listened to one of Gurumaa's talks on Nanak's *Jap ji Sahib* or listened to her sing the songs of Punjabi Sufi *faqirs* like Bulleh Shah or Baba Sheik Farid and tell the tales associated with their lives. Or he might have heard one of her discourses given abroad, primarily in English. What would he have thought of her then?

What does it mean to wear one hat one day and another the next? Some do and will get offended as exemplified in the story Gurumaa tells of the *mandir* and *gurdwara* administrators who fought over the rights to host her discourses in Kanpur. Despite the fact that she always takes care to cover her head when singing from the *Adi-Granth*, some Sikh listeners outside her fold have been greatly offended that she teaches the Sikh gurus' verses (*gurbānī*) outside of the *gurdwara* and to Hindu audiences, feeling that she is taking what is theirs and Hinduizing it, claiming it for Hindus the way that the Indian constitution claims the indigenous traditions of Sikhism and Jainism as "Hindu." Gurumaa sometimes berates her own audience stating that some Sikh listeners will cringe when she asks them to sing along with her "Shivoham" ("I am Shiva," refrain in Adishankara's *Atmashtakam*) or songs to Ram and Krishna and prefer instead that she chant *Waheguru* or sing solely Sikh verses. And she complains that her Hindu listeners are not open-minded enough to repeat the Sufi *zīkr* "Hu" or to practice remembrance of

the God's name (*nām simran*) "*Waheguru*." Gurumaa instead expands the meaning of the beloved and central Sikh practice of *nām simran* for her Sikh audience to include the chanting of any name of God, claiming regularly to all of her listeners that God doesn't speak only one language or reveal Truth in only one language.

Gurumaa's stated intention in her multiplicity of offerings is to open minds and hearts. Some, however, might see Gurumaa's wearing of multiple hats and singing songs of various traditions as a way of marketing herself and her abundant audio-visual products to the largest possible audience. Indeed, one offended Sikh Internet critic – a comment below one of her YouTube videos – likened Gurumaa to the infamous Ram-Rahīm, a contemporary guru notorious for scandal as well as his attempts to appeal to both Muslims and Hindus with his dually linked moniker, seemingly borrowed from a Kabir song.¹⁸⁰ Crossing boundaries of cherished religious traditions, especially if conceived as doing so irreverently, can cause discomfort for many people. In a short conversation about my research project with a rickshaw driver in Delhi, I was quickly cautioned about gurus like Ram-Rahīm after I had explained that the guru I was writing about was not Hindu, not Sikh, not Muslim, but a little of each. For writer of the YouTube comment as well as for my rickshaw driver (and no doubt for some others as well), multiply aligned spiritual teachers may not always be seen favorably or pluralistic, but rather, to be "strategically employ[ing]" syncretic modes (Mayaram 2004: 31).¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ See Charlotte Vaudeville's translation of Kabir's song in which he refers to the formless Lord as "Allah-Rām" and "Rahīm-Rām" (1997: 217-218).

¹⁸¹ Ram-Rahim, a guru from whose ashram horrific scandal emerged, seemed to my rickshaw driver to be one "strategically employ[ing]" syncretic modes. Some no doubt will say the same for Gurumaa, and she has often noted to me that "conservatives" do not like "renegade" or "revolutionary" mystics. She also makes links between what she says as does with those revolutionary mystics (often later taken to be the founders of world religions) whose deaths and/or persecution came from religious traditionalists who were afraid of their innovations.

Possible critiques aside for the singing of and adopting practices from multiple religious traditions, many spiritual seekers (*sādhaks*) in Gurumaa’s circle have expressed to me that because of Gurumaa they now have greater appreciation for that which is outside of their inherited faith traditions. Prema, born a Sikh, told me that she loves “tasting the nectar” that comes from doing meditation on the sound “Allah-hu.” Inspired by Gurumaa’s breadth of knowledge, Prema sits regularly with a local female spiritual teacher for talks on the *Upanishads* and *Bhagavad Gita*. As the guru whose form serves as the gate or the door for the disciple’s own experience of the divine, Gurumaa opens for her students a variety of inspirational sources, in hopes that more students can gain access. Some listeners, like the lady at the museum awed by the shiny floors, or the child interested in Gurumaa’s pretty earrings or the scholar concerned with classification and names, will get caught up in the motivations and meanings of religious accoutrements, and miss the real treasure housed within.

Gurumaa does wear the garb and she does change it, and in my opinion, she does so precisely to keep us guessing—hence her unabashed amusement at my meandering question regarding her identity. Describing herself to the seekers attending her Florida meditation retreat (2008), Gurumaa states, “I am not Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, Christian or Buddhist. I am just a baby. I am no one. Let me know after the retreat who you think I am.” Then she sang *Hare Krishna*. During the entire retreat whenever the audience awaited Gurumaa’s arrival, they listened to her (then) recently released *Zikr: Call of a Sufi*, an album of intoxicating, droning calls to god as Allah, composed by Gurumaa and her flautist, her Left Hand Man, after their journey to Turkey to learn more about the medieval Sufi poet, Rumi. In this American setting, I found Gurumaa’s

eclectic mix to be quite popular with most of those in her audience with whom I spoke, except for one woman who left the venue disappointed because she was an ardent devotee of Shiva and had come expecting songs to Shiva or talk of Shiva.

Though refusing to be labeled or to check a box, Gurumaa dons the apparel, so to speak, of various traditions when she sings songs beloved of one or another group. But in constantly changing, from garb to garb, from singing Hindu *bhajan* to Sikh *gurbānī*, from chanting Tantric or Vedic *mantra* to Sufi *zikr*, from decorating the stage (or temple) of her body according to her moods, she denies her regular listeners and observers the luxury of making tradition-bound truth claims, or as one devotee put it, Gurumaa helps them not to get “stuck” in anything.

The message she gives in her changing is this: while the garb can be helpful, it can also become a hindrance to real freedom. Gurumaa is not the only contemporary guru who speaks of the limitations of religious boundaries to real freedom. This is not an uncommon message from contemporary Indian gurus, even those who seem very much Hindu. Another spiritual teacher quite familiar in the global context and who proved to be attractive to Euro-American seekers, Swami Muktananda who established the Siddha Yoga tradition, expressed a similar notion, “Who is a Hindu? Who is a Vaishnavite? Who is a Jain, a Buddhist, A Sufi or a Christian? If you are imprisoned in one of these false identities, how can you find the freedom of the Self?” (Muktananda 2000: 31). New Age gurus prior to Gurumaa have also refused being labeled, and have reflected a similar eclectic spirituality through dress, such as Osho Rajneesh whose cross-religious and cross-cultural vestige included Turkish caps and *kurtas* (Osho 2000: 31).¹⁸²

¹⁸² Many critics would say that Osho is one who “strategically employed” syncretic modes.

Though she sometimes appears like one or another type, Gurumaa identifies herself as not one and not the other, not Hindu and not Sikh (primarily), but also not anything. When there was crossover attendance between the *mandir* and *gurdwara* during Gurumaa's visit to Kanpur—with turbaned Sikhs coming to the *mandir* and *tilaked* Hindus coming to the *gurdwara* to listen to her discourses—administrators from each demanded to know her religious identity.¹⁸³ She answered, “If you really want a reply, I am neither a Hindu nor a Sikh.” The religious administrators then suggested that she must be a Muslim out to make trouble for them both. She responds:

If it comforts your heart, then know that I am not even a Muslim... In this entire world, more than 350 different religions are practiced. You may not even know the names of all of them. Even if you name all of them one by one and ask me if I belong to any of them, my answer will still be in the negative; I will still deny it... The only answer I have is that I am love; wherever I find the fragrance of love, that place is mine own (Gurumaa 2010a: 37).

Here (in a printed book made from a transcribed discourse) Gurumaa retells the story in terms Hindu and Sikh, both for whom Muslim would be “other,” and in doing so addresses restrictive thinking to which some of her listeners who do subscribe to one of these two faith traditions might be prone. In addition to Gurumaa's words here, obviously parallel to Guru Nanak's already noted famous statement, she also echoes Kabir and other sants and Sufis who regularly criticized the orthodox representatives of Hindus and Muslims during their time. In Gurumaa's instructional reprimand given to so-called institutionally sanctioned representatives from two faith traditions, she echoes the critique in the songs of the sants (and *faqirs* like Bulleh Shah) leveled against mullahs and Brahmins. Also in her statement, while Gurumaa negates religious

¹⁸³ *Tilak* (also *tikka* in Punjabi) is a forehead mark, typically applied by Hindus. This scene is described in similar language by Gurumaa (2010a: 36).

belonging, she affirms certain theological aspects of it as well. She completes her speech to administrators in Kanpur with an affirmation, “In the same way, I am only ‘love’; wherever I find love, those people are mine and I belong to them. And so I am Hindu, a Muslim, a Sikh, a Buddhist, a Jew and a Jain; I am everything; I am all of these because I am none of these” (Gurumaa 2010: 37).

In my research proposal (later shared with Gurumaa upon her asking if I had yet written anything), I proposed that in absence of lineage and institutional backing, an independent guru such as Gurumaa perhaps builds her “lineage” and her legitimacy by teaching the life and the words of great masters such as Buddha, Shankara, Kabir, Baba Sheik Farid, Guru Nanak, and Baba Bulle Shah. The next day, Gurumaa addressed me in a small public gathering to correct my apparent misunderstanding. She explained that the saints, sants and realized ones she refers to, sings of and teaches about are “like-minded” individuals she “feels affinity with.”¹⁸⁴ In Gurumaa’s understanding, she does not have to stand on the shoulders of these giants in order to craft for herself a spiritual pedigree. But in referring to these masters, people are able to understand what she’s saying. Gurumaa insisted to me that she must speak on the level of her audience and about that which they are able to relate because only a few are ready to have a “direct encounter” with her. And she further explained that because she is a woman, people are even less likely to take the truth “directly” from her. Indeed, in order to do that, they not only have to put their gender bias aside, but must also be able to take that truth via all of her idiosyncrasy, and not be bothered by the fact that she’s not a “proper” Hindu or Sikh or Buddhist or Sufi, and to understand her as beyond categorization. She has taken her *sannyās* in her own way and she’s teaching and

¹⁸⁴ Darshan discourse transcript, Gurumaa Ashram, Gannaur, Haryana: 3 March 2008.

implementing her innovations regardless of her gender and without institutional backing. The way that she does this resembles the way of a “solitary sant” (Gold 1987a). In similar fashion to the solitary sant, instead of a lineage, Gurumaa relates to a clan made up of “like-minded” idiosyncratic seers whose songs she sings and whose stories she tells. To borrow Gold's language, outside of a traditional religious boundary, as a member of a “clan,” Gurumaa exists beyond the boundaries of institutions, even such fluid institutions as *sannyās* or “gurudom,” while at the same time remains intimately connected to north Indian spirituality.

The centrality of the Indian-ness in Gurumaa’s pluralistic spirituality I learned through my direct encounters with her. After Gurumaa laughed at me publicly and then told me she would keep me guessing, she delivered another line that has stuck with me: “I’ll be watching you.” I originally took this to mean she would be reading my work, and of course, I have pondered the significance of doing ethnographic research on a fully responsive subject. In my later reflections, however, I have come to see that Gurumaa was also, always, watching me, and observing me, all the while that I observed her. Returning from my travels to her ashram, Gurumaa would often comment on my appearance, noting that I was looking and becoming “more Indian” all the time, speaking better Hindi and wearing more Indian clothing.¹⁸⁵

In our most recent meeting in 2010 in New Jersey, Gurumaa made a comment about me, again in a small group, which was an affirmation of sorts in my mind and in the minds of those Indian Americans who surrounded us. She asked a question in Hindi

¹⁸⁵ Once she commented in a small group at the ashram after my travels in Punjab that I must have been Punjabi in a past life. Someone in her audience took that to mean (and gleefully explained to me later) that I had gained weight from accepting all the Punjabi hospitality. The kind attention she paid to me was generally well received, if I sometimes struggled to make my comeback in Hindi.

to which I responded in Hindi. Gurumaa then announced, “Angela is 40 percent Hindustani [Indian]!” affirming (with humor) a degree of Indian-ness which I had always felt myself, while also indicating a relative authenticity to this crowd for whom Indian-ness is the best. Gurumaa contends that you cannot put a patent on the Truth, that what she speaks today is a new version of the same Truth taught in earlier times, and in a great many places. However, she also holds, speaks and exudes tremendous self-respect in her pluralistic, yet decidedly *Indian* spiritual heritage. She may have a bit of Turkish Sufism mixed in and little Zen Buddhism as well as other additions in her scriptural and inspirational canon from outside of India, and certainly strong respect and tolerance for other traditions, but I would be hard pressed to call her anything less than 90 percent Indian. So while I enjoyed the fact that Gurumaa had in a sense figured out that on some level my longing to be in India was real and part of my own plural identity, I also have to ask myself, “If I sized her up as 40 percent American, how would she take it?”

Spiritual seekers and pluralism in Gurumaa’s circle

Spiritual seekers (*sādhaks*) from around the world have been attracted to the “Buddhafiield” of Gurumaa Ashram, yet these seekers have been thus far predominantly of Indian heritage. When living there, I met seekers from various cities in India as well as NRI seekers from the UK, the US, Canada, and Australia. The vast majority of seekers who regularly frequented Gurumaa Ashram came from urban centers of north India, from Hindi and Punjabi linguistic regions, but they too, like Gurumaa, like me, and like most of us living in the world today have their hearts connected to multiple places of

belonging.¹⁸⁶

Gurumaa's devotees answered my questions about their religious identities with varying interest. Most had little interest in talking about what they viewed as old or "stale" traditions. Some devotees I recognized fairly obviously as belonging to traditions Hindu or Sikh by their names or by their dress, and many seemed perfectly comfortable living with these markers of their traditions while following their "revolutionary master," who herself refuses categorization. Nonetheless many seekers I spoke with were drawn to Gurumaa because of the "boundary-less" vision of spirituality that she verbalizes and embodies, even when their lives were grounded in one or another faith tradition. Because of the exposure offered to them by Gurumaa, they were interested in learning about the traditions outside of their inherited ones and many had incorporated meditation or chanting practices from other traditions into their regular spiritual discipline. However, I also found a great number of devotees who were ready to let go of what might best be understood as the "attachments" to their inherited traditions even if not letting go of traditions themselves, and they expressed this in various ways.

A young Punjabi man living in Jaipur answered my question about his religious identity, "I am nothing. I am spiritual." A woman named Shelly from Florida who was born Sikh and married a Sikh responded, "I like freedom! Let me do what I want to do. I'm just spiritual . . . I'm just a soul. Honestly, if I had to check a box . . . I'd pick Hindu." This, she volunteered, is only because she adores Krishna and deems him "the most absolutely interesting god!" Gurmeet, from Delhi, wears the Sikh turban and sings

¹⁸⁶ Mayaram quotes Raimon Pannikar, who asserts in his introduction to the autobiography of the cross-dressed (Hindu-Christian) missionary, Abhishektananda, "To live at the meeting point of several traditions is the destiny of a large portion of the human race" (Mayaram 2004: 37).

gurbānī whenever he is not listening to Gurumaa’s songs and teachings as he drives his cab or sits waiting for a customer’s return. I asked Gurmeet once if he observed all the “five Ks” of the Sikh tradition because I had never seen him carry the sword (*kirpān*). He responded, “No I don’t carry the *kirpān*. Well, I’m not a real Sikh. I just love Gurumaa. I’m nothing. I am a Sufi.”¹⁸⁷ A facebook friend from north India who attended Gurumaa’s Sufi Shivir posted this “status” on his facebook “wall:” “Knock, And He’ll open the door / Vanish, And He’ll make you shine like the sun / Fall, And He’ll raise you to the heavens / Become nothing, And He’ll turn you into everything — Rumi.”¹⁸⁸ Becoming “nothing” as a means to be become everything seems to be something that really resonates with this student of Gurumaa who had earlier posted on his “wall” these words attributed to the father of yoga in the West: “FEEL like Christ and you will be a Christ; feel like Buddha and you will be a Buddha. It is feeling that is the life, the strength, the vitality, without which no amount of intellectual activity can reach God.” by Swami Vivekananda.”¹⁸⁹

These few bold examples, I find indicative of a trend I see among Gurumaa’s avid listeners and retreat participants who themselves ascribe to a boundary-less vision of the spiritual path that does not limit them to any one tradition yet opens them to

¹⁸⁷ This statement seems to me to come almost directly from a series of Gurumaa’s talks on the topic: “What is a Sufi?” given to seekers on a meditation retreat called *Sufi Shivir* in her ashram in 2007. The aforementioned young man from Jaipur had also attended this retreat, after which he also identified himself alternatively as a Sufi and as “nothing” yet claiming no religious tradition. Gurmeet had attended the shivir and then later read the transcripts published in book called *Rumi Aur Mein*. The book is now also available in English translation, as *Rumi’s Love Affair*. In the talk I refer to here—echoed later in Gurmeet’s words—Gurumaa gives multiple definitions for the term “Sufi” and ultimately equates “Sufi” with Love. She also says that a Sufi is “nothing” because a Sufi is not this not that, only concerned with Love, Divine Love.

¹⁸⁸ Facebook post, November 30, 12:08 pm (EST). <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=1396744561> accessed 30 November 2011.

¹⁸⁹ Facebook post, November 23, 1:56 pm (EST). <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=1396744561> accessed 30 November 2011. Likely these quotations came from the Internet and I have not verified their accuracy.

wisdom from each of them. Sometimes like hers, their religious identities were somewhat confounding, looking like one thing and then another, and then not like either, sometimes labeled as “nothing.”

I met a self-identifying Sikh family in the ashram who has spent years living back and forth between India and the US. Many years ago the father chose to cut his hair and even changed his name to end with the Sanskritized “ra” suffix as opposed to the Punjabi “er” suffix, choosing Ravindra instead of Ravinder, the name given by his Sikh parents, because he enjoyed the “a” ending sound. When living in the US, he changed the Pal in his name to Paul and he has not worn a turban for years. Dropping the more visible Sikh markers, nonetheless, Ravindra chants the *Mūl Mantra* in his regular disciplined practice of mantra repetition (*mantra japa*). Gurumaa gave Ravindra this particular verse as his personal *guru-mantra*, also the first verse of the of Nanak’s *Jap ji Sahib*, which begins the Sikh holy book. Ravindra explained to me that Gurumaa often gives the *Mūl Mantra* to her Sikh devotees because its meaning resonates deeply in their hearts. Ravindra’s life partner has never cut her hair and asks the same of their sons while they are in her charge. The sons are mini-turbaned teens attending a Sikh boarding school in India, an inclination that came first as a protection against the violence their parents feared they might meet wearing turbans in the US after 9/11/01. Their mother insists that the boys first learn their own heritage well and then decide whether or not to keep their hair and other signifiers of their faith. Like Gurumaa’s mother, these parents, both self-ascribed “saint-lovers,” spend time with spiritual teachers from the syncretistic Sikh ascetic Nirmala and Udasi orders as well as with various Hindu swamis and sadhus—seeking, like Gurumaa herself once did, the

company of “like-minded” souls who have “tasted the nectar.”

Shelly, in Florida, who prefers to call her path “freedom,” said this of her childhood in Kolkata:

When I was a child, I was going to school, in a Christian school. Sang from Bible, played piano, spoke English. Came home every day and heard *gurbānī*. Mom was not conservative, but we always had *Guru Granth Sahib* at ceremonies. *Gurbānī* was in my system! As I grew up, when I did something different, they [parents] would say, ‘No, you’re a Sikh.’ Luckily we [her family, mainly she and her sister] met Gurumaa! Now when I’m in a mosque, I can enjoy. I read Quran. I love it. Read the Bible. I love it. But I’m not *stuck* in anything! [Speaker’s own emphasis added].¹⁹⁰

When I asked Shelly what she thought of Gurumaa’s own religious identity, she replied, “When you come on the planet, you take birth someplace. Gurumaa was born a Sikh. Gurumaa would say. You *are* free. If you think you are the body, you are wrong. Go away!” [Speaker’s spoken emphasis added]. Many of Gurumaa’s disciples, I learned, are not so quick to check a box indicating their own religious or spiritual identity, even when they do wear a visible indicator of some faith tradition on their bodies. And some of them just might keep us guessing about their identities like Ravinder, also known as Ravindra, and Shelly with her “*gurbānī* in [her] system” and Lord Krishna in her heart.

As Gurumaa’s devotees shared with me stories of their spiritual journeys and relationships to Gurumaa, they were also very keen to receive the same from me. I was a wonder to them: how in the world did this ordinary American woman get the karma to study saints? And more specifically, how did she manage to spend time with and have access to their beloved guru (and then to make her ashram trips with funding from her government)? As Gurumaa’s devotees asked for my spiritual autobiography and I found myself in a position of having to narrate one, I discovered (or perhaps remembered)

¹⁹⁰ Telephone conversation, 14 September 2009.

that I too did not want to be put into any box, even into that of a tradition that had brought some meaning to my life—that I too was a rejecter of labels.

For many *sādhaks*, like Gurumaa herself, life is lived with one foot in one world (*loka*) and one foot in another, whether those *lokas* represent different religious traditions, nation states, or cultural ties. And even for those who live in mostly one small world, that world seems to be ever expanding to include the styles of other places. Even if travel to another *loka* is something one only dreams about, other places can be visited and experienced at some level through available technologies. Moreover, other *lokas* as well as other philosophies and “ways of seeing” (*darśana*) can be experienced at some level through encounters with the teacher whose own form is like a gateway to the inner shrine of absolute intimacy and endless possibility.

Conclusion - “mera dil hai Hindustani”

Vestments have long indicated religious belonging and have situated religious specialists in their traditions within India and in other parts of the world. Throughout her life and spiritual journey, Gurumaa has made her own choices and changes in her physical appearance following particular conventions in some cases (in her choices of white and then ochre) and breaking with convention in others. Furthermore, Gurumaa seems to watch others observing her with some level of bemusement.

Additionally, there are times that Gurumaa dresses the way people would have her dress. In a private conversation in Gurdaspur, Punjab, wearing toenail polish and earrings, but not yet adorned with the touch of mascara she would later apply, Gurumaa defended her self-styled modes of dress:

Who says that masters need to dress badly? Sikhs are always very clean. Why can't masters have beautiful ashrams? Do you see any gods not looking nice? Look at Krishna with his peacock feather in his hair, wearing pink and green. [*She explained that some people call her a revolutionary mystic and that some call her glamorous.*] Everything I wear people give to me. I dress as they like for me to. They want me to look like Durga, looking pretty in nice clothes and sometimes I wear those [nice clothes] and sometimes I want to wear cotton as I do today.¹⁹¹

While she complies and dresses the way that people would like for her to dress, at least on some level—even just in playing the role of a woman, a north Indian one at that—she plays a certain role. She is who people want her to be at least on some level: she has accepted names given to her at various times and she sometimes dresses as they would have her do it. Because of who she is and where she comes from she attracts certain people, at least initially. She lives in a female body that is ethnically Indian. She speaks Punjabi, Hindi and English. She has traveled much of the known world.

Gurumaa's desire to keep people guessing about her attire as well as her religious identity, however, implies a refusal on her part to be any single thing for her devotees, to fulfill their expectations of her or to indulge that which they would project onto her. In exhibiting fluid and formless freedom through her body, Gurumaa disallows those who listen to and watch her closely to become attached to any one idea of that freedom. She may be their "idol of bliss," *Anandmurti*, but she remains so in her very own way, in her own style.

Reflecting on my own 40 percent Hindustani identity, as well as the number of times I was described in fieldwork as having a heart (*dil*) that was Indian, I am reminded of the famous song from 1950s Indian cinema in which Raj Kapoor, playing Raju, "a Chaplinesque Indian Everyman" sang (lip synced, really) the lyrics, offered here in

¹⁹¹ Paraphrased from a conversation that occurred on 13 March 2008, recorded immediately after in field notes.

Salman Rushdie's translation: "O, my shoes are Japanese. These trousers English, if you please. On my head, red Russian hat — My heart's Indian for all that."¹⁹² Somewhat less comically than Raju, Gurumaa too reflects through her body a changing world of complex cultural exchange and encounter. As "all-in-one guru," she is a bit the Indian everywoman, a 21st century Raju with a foot here and there and clothed with pieces from here and there. She maintains heart-connections with loved ones in multiple localities, while her heart remains Hindustani. Through words and through the body itself, Gurumaa speaks the language of her audience, an audience made up of people whose lives are often tied to multiple worlds of belonging.

Gurumaa, like many of the gurus of the 20th century who brought yoga to America and like the north Indian medieval poet *sants* who addressed the complex cultural interactions of their times, has her finger on the pulse of the way a great many people in our contemporary world feel today, at odds with the restrictions of inherited religious tradition in a world where spiritual possibilities seem endless. Her audience seems to hunger for knowledge from outside known boundaries even when they feel most comfortable within those traditions or feel somewhat beholden to them. From the particular place where she originates, from the particular place where she now stands, and among the particular audiences for whom her words resonate most greatly, Gurumaa addresses today's complex cultural encounter, and while doing so validates and affirms the heritage of Indian spiritual expertise as a whole. Those of fundamentalist or exclusivist viewpoints do and will find some of her words offensive

¹⁹² This apt phrase describing Raju, "the Indian Everyman," comes from scholar, Philip Leutgendorf's, short summary of the film *Sri 420* at *Phillip's Filums*: <http://www.uiowa.edu/~incinema/shri420.html>. The title *Sri 420*, Leutgendorf translates as "Mister Cheat." To call someone a 420 (*char sau bis*) is to imply they are a cheat – a reference to the Indian penal code section 420. *Mera Joota hai Japani, mera pantaloon Inglistani, sir pe lal topi Rusi, phir bhi dil me Hindustani* are the lyrics translated by Rushdie (1991: 11).

as these stances quite often come under her attack. About this she expresses no regrets. She also makes no claims of inclusivism or “pluralism.” As Gurumaa’s known world continues to expand, and as she begins to incorporate new registers into her spoken teachings, so too does her audience expand. In the process of expanding her own audience, not unlike Nanak, Gurumaa expands the audiences of sages from other contexts as she sings other *bhaktas’* (or *bhagats’*) songs. She can sometimes look like a Hindu renouncer, sometimes look like a Sikh, sometimes look glamorous, glossy and New Age, but just listen to this female guru’s voice for a few minutes and you will hear quite clearly that her non-Hindu, non-Sikh, non-Muslim heart is indeed Hindustani.

CHAPTER 5
Shakti's New Voice

Introduction

At some point in the latter half of the 1980s, even though she was at the top of her class, Gurpreet Kaur Grover took a hiatus in her academic studies at the Government College for women in Amritsar to attend to matters she would later come to understand and articulate as “more pressing.” In just a few years time and barely into her twenties, Gurpreet would be known as “Swamiji” to many housewives in Amritsar, and then known later by the name Anandmurti Gurumaa. In 2009 when Gurumaa spoke the words, “more pressing,” at this same college while participating in an event in her honor, she was referring to the “more pressing,” all-compelling, spiritual quest which in her early twenties took her away from home, school, city and family. What might be seen as “running away” in some contexts, in the devotional context that surrounds the very public guru persona of Gurumaa today, her flight from Amritsar can be seen quite differently, as empowering, and even as revolutionary. That Gurumaa, now a well-known contemporary spiritual teacher, would be invited as an honored guest back to the college she fled says something about the way that people today view the woman she has become. First, her choice to return to the college for women in Amritsar is in keeping with her frequent and adamant statements about a girl's right to and need for an education. It was also at this event, that her alma mater expressed its gratitude to Gurumaa's organization for providing scholarships to needy female students. In my years of observing Gurumaa from quite close as well as from a distance, it is apparent that she rarely makes public appearances for anything other than teaching.¹⁹³

¹⁹³ There are very few exceptions to this that I know of. One notable exception was her participation in the Global Peace Initiative for Women (GPIW) in March 2008 in Jaipur, Rajasthan. At GPIW, female

Therefore, we might also view her return and her acceptance of the honors bestowed on her as indicative of her own affectionate acknowledgement for the whole of her life's journey. Perhaps it also reveals a sense of kinship with those who guided Gurpreet as a young person and put her in the setting in which she could become that woman.

Stories of the lives of spiritual adepts possess a certain power as stories, especially as these stories intertwine with, inform and inspire the lives of those who admire them and follow their teachings (Orsi 2005). It certainly should not surprise us that the events of Anandmurti Gurumaa's life before she accepted that formal name and title would be of interest to and celebrated by her devotees. Neither should it surprise us then, that a skeptic would read her story differently than a devotee or even a college administrator happy to bring a celebrity alumnus (one who also offers financial aid packages to the college's underprivileged students) back to campus. A Wikipedia editor identified only by an IP address contributed to the "discussion" page of the Wikipedia entry "Anandmurti Gurumaa." Reacting to a "biased" entry written from the perspective of a devotee and contributing to the very democratic editorial "discussion" of this entry, the skeptic editor recommends, "include a history section about gurumaa namely her birth name – surely she wasn't called anandmurti gurumaa by her parents secondly, include the section of her running away and how this is suppose to motivate/encourage other girls" [sic].¹⁹⁴ Even in this recommendation, an underlying assumption exists, that the lives of spiritual adepts (perhaps individually known as guru, saint, prophet, *sant*, mystic, or sage) *ought* to teach us something, that

religious and spiritual leaders along with political activists representing countries from around the world converged. I attended the event (with my 6 year old daughter in tow).

¹⁹⁴ 79.66.89.250 (posted on 28 December 2007) at url: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Anandmurti_Gurumaa

the life of a spectacular person should somehow motivate and encourage the rest of us.

In what follows, I tell the story of Gurpreet Kaur Grover's running away, the little of it that I know, and I tell it in the spirit of and from the perspectives of devotee-story tellers who told it to me. Sometimes, when indicated, I tell pieces I have learned from Gurumaa's own words in both public and private settings. Retaining the devotional flavor helps to reveal the narrative's meaning in the lives of those who admire Gurumaa, allowing further exploration of how life stories might be understood as texts and how stories and lives intertwine and influence one another.

This chapter examines the ways in which Gurumaa's life and activism express tradition and innovation in regards to gendered religious and domestic expectations for women in India, and it also highlights the ways in which Gurumaa's own life and activism may color the lives of her female devotees. To that end, I offer examples of "narrative overlaps" between the guru's life and the lives of her urban middle class female followers in India and in the United States. These along with Gurumaa's story reveal that at least some female disciples see her as a model and have even integrated elements of her story into their own lives. Robert Orsi, whose term "narrative overlaps" I borrow, found through an examination of his own family lore alongside the devotional biography of a Catholic saint from the homeland that "the two sets of stories regularly intersected so as really to constitute a single genre of popular narrative—a kind of domestic hagiography" (2005: 112). Even beyond the intertwined narratives offering mirror like reflections of one another, Orsi contends, "the two kinds of stories fundamentally shaped and formed each other" (112). The living histories or hagiographies of Gurumaa and her female disciples are narratives "in process." The

conversation happening between these narratives of lives so fully being lived, offers a window into the creation of new master narratives of female religious leadership and religiosity. The stories of female gurus in our current age, becoming more prominent and plentiful than ever before, will also shape what future generations may understand to be the master narrative of the guru role.

I also look briefly at material efforts made by Gurumaa, in her now relative position of strength as a public figure and guru in control of some cultural and financial capital, as she actively seeks to empower girls and women. In doing this, I take Gurumaa's "active" efforts, as demonstrated in her words (spoken and sung and presented in various media) as well as the educational aid programs she has initiated to be her activism. Educational aid programs including the financial aid scholarships at the Government College fall under Gurumaa's non-governmental organization (NGO), "*Shakti*: an initiative to empower the girl child."¹⁹⁵ Gurumaa does not characterize herself as a humanitarian or as a social service guru (in fact she said to me once that social service was not her main "gig" but rather, a "side dish"), but this female guru's spoken words indicate that she cares more about social justice than she does censure from religious authority. For this reason, I have heard her characterize herself as a "revolutionary mystic," as "firebrand" and even as "renegade." And, not surprisingly, this is how many of her disciples see her too. Indeed, it is through her activism, as broadly defined above, towards empowering women and girls that we might best attempt to understand Gurumaa as a "revolutionary." Gurumaa's revolutionary qualities may have less to do with her NGO work toward providing education for needy girls

¹⁹⁵ The words in quotations come from the official motto of Gurumaa's *Shakti* program as printed on pamphlets, press releases and even t-shirts.

(many mainstream and even traditional gurus male and female alike are working in this area), and more to do with her very direct, verbalized attention to ways Indian society ought to bring about change in the way females are treated from their time in the womb forward.¹⁹⁶ Charpentier makes a similar assessment about Gurumaa, “She consciously uses her socially sanctioned position as spiritual master in subversive ways, thus challenging all forms of oppression that support patriarchy” (2010: 257).

Through her use of clear and bold speech (*bindās bolna*), Gurumaa’s words often challenge the status quo in a way that words spoken from within “traditional” religious perspectives do not. Herself empowered by a modern Western education, scriptural study of Indic and other religious traditions and most importantly, her own experience, Gurumaa levels critique at what she sees as the misrepresentations and misinterpretations of Truth coming to us as “dogma” from within “tradition.” Standing outside of tradition, indeed refusing to be “put into any box,” or any religious tradition, yet drawing from many, Gurumaa is in a strong position from which to offer critique. No religious authority can yank away her pluralistic and charismatic authority. However, she is a revolutionary, one might say, only so far as she is innovative. Thus, it is the degree to which she ably reframes, reshapes and re-articulates from within tradition (albeit a very broad pan-Indic religious one) that she is able to effect change.

¹⁹⁶ The Ramakrishna Mission begun by Swami Vivekananda in honor of his guru, Ramakrishna, has long set the standard for social service work among “Hindu” gurus. The Mata Amritanandamayi Mission and Trust, an organization begun under the auspices of Mata Amritanandamayi (Ammachi), offers loan programs for widows, schooling for girls and a huge array of service programs. Swaminarayan Hindu branches of various kinds, following the lead of their 19th c founder, have long engaged in social service. A look at the websites of many contemporary gurus reveals a number of such programs. The Sikh tradition into which Gurumaa was born is well known for service to society at large. But none of these have used the sort of “revolutionary” language to talk about what they are doing and to critique tradition and society as Gurumaa does.

Though she was born to a Sikh family, Gurumaa has accepted the title “guru” in adopting the name given to her by devotees, Anandmurti Gurumaa, naturally making her seem more like a Hindu spiritual master than Sikh, given the clear directive in Sikh religious history that the human guru lineage would end with Guru Govind Singh, the tenth Sikh guru. Even though she is neither Hindu nor Sikh, because Gurumaa draws extensively from Indian religious traditions often labeled Hindu, it remains useful to consider Gurumaa among other contemporary female Hindu gurus.

Karen Pechilis has suggested in recent work that the public prominence of female religious leadership in Hinduism occurring today provides a “creative space” for understanding “inherited issues of women’s spirituality” and further asserts that female gurus “approach the conflict of wifely dharma and spirituality” in diverse ways (Pechilis 2004: 30). Female gurus today take many and varied stances on womanhood, spirituality and women’s roles and they offer these stances vis-à-vis their own differing physical forms and appearances (Charpentier 2010; Pechilis 2004).¹⁹⁷ Finally, female gurus offer diversity within the already-diversified religious (and multi-religious) role of guru. Kathleen Erndl reminds us that “Hindu gurus are a non-institutional institution” with much authority coming from the guru’s personal charisma instead of through hierarchical structures (Erndl 2004: 246). Female gurus independent of authoritative institutional hierarchy, like Gurumaa, also offer what might be expressed as a “site of undetermination,” a term coined by Kumkum Sangari that Meena Khandelwal finds useful in her examination of Hindu female renunciators (*sannyasinis*)

¹⁹⁷ In Charpentier’s expansive coverage of female Hindu gurus, she mentions a South Indian male guru known by his followers as Amma (Naryani Amma) meaning “mother,” and claims to be an embodiment of the goddess, *Nārāyanī* (2010: 245-246).

(Khandelwal 2004: 43).¹⁹⁸ Khandelwal explains that for women, just the act of taking vows of renunciation in the order she examines most closely, *Dashnami*, is a transgressive act. And further, “the social world of sannyasa [Hindu renunciation] operates on a free market model without any authoritative hierarchy... There are little in the way of institutional constraints on who can call herself a sadhu or wears the ochre robes of sannyasa.” (Khandelwal 2004b: 45). Similarly, in just being a “guru,” a woman is already transgressing something.¹⁹⁹ Both Hindu renunciation and guru-hood provide already-flexible boundaries ready to be reshaped and restructured by the entry and presence of women. When we take into account also the fact that traditions of renunciation and guru-hood exist outside of what we might call “Hindu,” throughout pan-Indic religious forms, then we might begin to see even more “sites of undetermination” or “creative spaces.” It is worth noting here that Pechilis also points to the fact that female gurus we might call Hindu have the “tendency to avoid calling their paths ‘Hinduism’ in favor of a path of spirituality open to all” (2004: 35).

Looking at the life and work of Gurumaa, a charismatic, outspoken, non-institutionally aligned female guru alongside stories from the lives of her female followers, not only reveals some “narrative overlaps” but also will allow us to observe a contemporary and vibrant example of a “creative space” for women in the context of current day north Indian spirituality. Furthermore, it offers us a window from which to observe tradition and innovation in a contemporary female-led spiritual movement.

¹⁹⁸ Khandelwal quotes and cites Sangari, Kumkum. “Consent, Agency and Rhetorics of Incitement.” *Economic and Political Weekly*. May 1, 1993: 867-882, p. 872.

¹⁹⁹ Pechilis discusses the non-existence of a feminine form of the masculine noun, “guru,” a linguistic point with which Charpentier disagrees giving her own affirmation of the existence (even if rarity of use) of the Sanskrit word, *gurvī* (Charpentier 2010: 18; Pechilis 2004a: 5-6). Nonetheless, both scholars assert the somewhat transgressive nature of a woman’s becoming a guru. Charpentier, though she denies Pechilis’ claim, concedes that the term, *gurvī*, is “generally not used in female guru contexts thus suggesting that the role is traditionally regarded as primarily masculine” (2010:18).

Gurumaa's innovations are very much in sync with Indian religiosity, even if sometimes out of sync with particular structural forms or dogma within Indian religiosity. Pechilis echoes Rita Gross in expressing that the change or transformation that a revolutionary seeks to effect must come from within her particular context in order for it to make sense and to work in that context (Pechilis 2004: 7).²⁰⁰ The change or transformation that Gurumaa seeks to effect in Indian women and girls is a change that comes from within the spiritual seeker's own embodiment, and that power of transformation is *shakti*, known in Indian religious traditions since ancient times as the feminine cosmogonic power or force. Because she has accessed her own shakti through her spiritual quest, Gurumaa reclaims it and then seeks to share it from her own being, her own female embodiment. Thus while Gurumaa innovates, she does so from a perspective traditional enough to reach the hearts of her listeners who come from various religious traditions, listeners who are perhaps not yet sufficiently empowered themselves to claim—much less to re-claim and re-formulate—from within their own or other honored traditions. Tradition, innovation and boundary expansion are evident from the beginning of Gurpreet Kaur Grover's life, especially in the short story of her flight from and her return to Amritsar. Before offering more details of Gurumaa's story, I offer first her song, *Suno Suno* in translation, verse providing a tangible example of how Gurumaa gives new voice to old ideas, and in doing so reclaims power and broadens the audience.²⁰¹

²⁰⁰ Pechilis references Rita Gross' discussion of the terminology of reformists and revolutionaries and the varying degrees of personal affiliations and breaks with traditional religions (2004). See also (Gross 1996).

²⁰¹ A more uniform transliteration would be *Sunno Sunno*, but I use *Suno Suno*, to be consistent with Gurumaa's own publishing house, *Gurumaa Vani*, and her record label, *Mystica Music*.

Embodying Shakti, transformative power

Gurumaa's song, "Suno Suno" (*Listen!*)

Listen! Listen!
Listen! Listen!

Listen to my voice,
Listen to this new instrument.
Today, I have gotten my wings
I have to take flight!

[refrain:] Listen! Listen!
Listen! Hey, Listen!

From me the world turns
From me comes your glory.
From me devotion is received.
I myself am your Shakti (strength, power)
Refrain

Some desire has awakened in my mind
I have found a new path in my mind.
Let me make a new garden
Let me establish a new world!
Refrain

Let me light up the world
Let no one block my way.
I am Shakti. I am woman.
Let no one see me as a pitiable girl!
*Refrain*²⁰²

The studio mixing of the song *Suno Suno (Listen!)* gives it a global sounding beat. It is a song made attractive to the young with Western rock, Irish folk, Indian folk and Indian filmi melodies. Unaccompanied, Gurumaa sang the lyrics for a studio recording. Her voice was then mixed in the studio with various instruments, the *sārangī*, flute, and penny whistle, along with voice in different modulation and a choir. Despite the loud

²⁰² See Appendix A for Hindi lyrics of the translated song in its entirety.

and rollicking music created by the other instruments, Gurumaa’s voice, the “new instrument” (*nayā ye sāz*) stands out with clarity, force and repetition, making the message in her lyrics easily understood.²⁰³

Gurumaa composed *Suno Suno* for the explicit purpose of inspiring girls to take flight and to soar, to learn to draw their strength from within themselves, to find devotion and to find the effective power for transformation (*shakti*), within. I sat in two audiences to hear this song as it was first released. In the first of these two audiences (February 2009), in Ludhiana, Punjab, Gurumaa heard the song for the first time (after the studio-mixing) at an event to celebrate 10 years of her Shakti NGO.²⁰⁴ This event also featured a singing contest among local children (90% girls), who performed for an audience made up of participant family members and friends as well as Gurumaa’s devotee-supporters of her non-profit organization. Later in the same year (October 2009), I heard the song played for an entirely different set of girls—recipients of the *Shakti* NGO’s education tuition program, when these girls traveled from various locations (mostly north India) to Gurumaa Ashram for programs with Gurumaa.²⁰⁵

When Gurumaa sings from the narrative perspective of *Shakti* – as *Shakti* – she gives this ancient theological concept voice in the contemporary world. And in this song, *Shakti* identifies herself as a power that is accessible not just to male gods in

²⁰³ In the song *Suno Suno*, Gurumaa not only uses repetition in her refrain, but she also repeats each couplet throughout. In my translation, I show each couplet once in the interest of space and readability, though, of course, songs are meant to be heard not read—especially so with a title like “listen.”

²⁰⁴ Gurumaa’s Left Hand Man and director of *Mystica Music* unveiled “*Suno Suno*,” offering the new creation to Gurumaa at this event, which is the product of his devoted service (he is a professional musician and studio-recorder). Often new releases of Gurumaa’s albums are offered at public events, a devotional act fulfilling dual purposes: the offering is at once part of the celebration and also the audience’s introduction to the latest product for sale in the ashram and at gurumaa.com.

²⁰⁵ Bus and train travel as well as accommodation in the ashram were provided to each girl and an adult chaperone. Ashramites explained to me that Gurumaa brings in the *Shakti* girls about twice a year, for instructional programs (meditation and postural yoga) and time with Gurumaa.

trouble with demons, but one also accessible and already existing within the listener. In both of Gurumaa's early mixed gender audiences, girls were prominent among the listeners. The first person voice, both as the Shakti existing *within* and as its embodied form (the female guru), tells the second person to "listen!" (*sunō sunō*) and discover your own shakti.

Here in the song *Suno Suno* and elsewhere, Gurumaa points to herself as an embodiment of Shakti, the feminine creative power existing within each individual, male or female. Both male and female gurus can be understood as embodiments of Shakti. The female gurus however might be understood as "the classic embodiment[s] of shakti" (Pechilis 2004: 34). Theologically, as the feminine cosmogonic power, Shakti is also the creative power (or potential power) existing within all beings. Gurumaa stresses that women, particularly, are embodiments of shakti because through their bodies they are creators of life. Yet Shakti is within and available to all. Once a person recognizes Shakti within, that person becomes strong. She must take "flight" (*parvāz*). She will create a "new world" (*nayī duniyā*) and she will not be seen as a "pitiable girl" (*becāri*). The first person singer of *Suno Suno* is both the empowered one (here, the guru) and also the power that exists within the seeker's own form, within her own being. If the second person listener cannot yet recognize herself as Shakti, then she might be able to see Shakti in the form of the guru who embodies it for her.

Power, empowerment and the meanings of words

The multivalent English word empowerment can be understood in varied ways and from varied perspectives. Similarly, the Sanskrit word shakti has a number of meanings in contemporary Indian settings, languages and dialects as well as a long history of meanings in Indian scriptural traditions. One helpful way to understand shakti in the setting of contemporary yogic gurus is to look first at its literal meaning. Shakti comes from a verbal root meaning, “to be able.” As the meaning of shakti expands into the yogic context, it can be seen as “that which is an effective power,” a “power of transformation, a power of change, a power of creativity.”²⁰⁶ When the power of change comes from within the seeker as a spiritual awakening, from inside an educated girl (herself having worked to achieve that education), it can be *em-powering*. One of the many clever Shakti NGO tee shirts sold in the ashram reads “Shakti inside” bringing home Gurumaa’s message that shakti exists right there in the embodied human form of the wearer.

On the yogic path of *guru-bhakti*, we can think of the power of transformation as that shakti which the guru manifests, embodies and emits, a power capable of awakening or igniting the shakti within another. Modern spiritual teachers have sometimes utilized metaphoric language of the guru as electrical transformer or “powerhouse” (*shakti bhavan*, the name used for electrical power grids). Such a powerhouse has the capacity to transmit energy to others. We must keep in mind this yogic perspective of power as shakti and *empowerment* as the awakening of that transforming power that already existing within human beings. Shakti is both the

²⁰⁶ Mahony, Bill. Recording of *Tantric Scholars Panel*, *Yoga Journal* annual convention, Estes Park, Colorado, 2008.

power itself and the empowering transformation; thus it is the power and the empowerment. This theological understanding of shakti is important to consider alongside other meanings in contemporary imagination.

A more Western feminist way of thinking about empowerment might focus on the multi layered forces of oppression that *dis*-empower women in addition to gender discrimination itself.²⁰⁷ I have found Gurumaa's language to strike surprisingly close to that in Western feminist literature and Indian feminist journalism. And I encountered this language in our very first meeting on July 4, 2006. At that time I met Gurumaa in Hudson Valley, New York where she was giving a meditation retreat. I was ushered (quite self-consciously) to the front of a small group of seated disciples who were participating in this program. Gurumaa straightforwardly asked me, "What do you want to know?" and I proceeded to ask about her *Shakti* initiative.

I asked Gurumaa how her Shakti NGO project empowers girls, and asked her to elaborate on what she means by "empowerment." Gurumaa replied that "Shakti" provides three types of empowerment for recipients of her tuition program.²⁰⁸ Secular education empowers the girls *materially* so that they are not dependent on men for subsistence. Meditation instruction empowers them *spiritually* to realize enlightenment is available to them. And martial arts instruction empowers them *physically* to defend

²⁰⁷ The Sangtin writers group is concerned with the entangled structures of violence, that exist as "tight knots of poison" in women's hearts. As activists, the Sangtin writers tell their personal stories through the process of diary writing to uncover these structures as well as to alter them in their own lives and in the lives of those they work to help. Seeing their lives from a new perspective through the process of narrative writing, they report: "To tell the truth it was only when we wrote and shared our diaries that we could begin to untie by ourselves, and with one another, the tight knots of poison that were implanted within the many layers of our hearts" (Nagar and Writers (Organization) 2006: 69). It was the wish of the Sangtin writers that their trials would be the narratives studied in schools instead of Sita's trial by fire. Therefore, it was through the power of language, the power of the word and the power of voice that these women sought to bring change. Their stories have actually been included in some school textbooks now (Richa Nagar: Seminar at Syracuse University April 5, 2007).

²⁰⁸ Our conversation was specifically about the tuition program for girls up to class 12; it was not about her college tuition program or other programs that now exist under the Shakti NGO umbrella.

themselves against unwanted advances from men.²⁰⁹ With her multi-level scheme of empowerment, Gurumaa attempts to teach young girls already disempowered by intertwining structures of economic, religious and social hierarchies to claim material, spiritual and physical powers. Gurumaa's adoption of the Sanskrit *shakti* constitutes a reclamation of women's power. Some scholars, and perhaps some of her followers, might see Gurumaa as attempting to rescue shakti "from its patriarchal prison" (Erndl 2000: 96). With the Shakti NGO, Gurumaa reaches out to underprivileged girls, usually the girl children of widows and war orphans, thus, the most vulnerable group in terms of access to education in India.²¹⁰ Under the umbrella of Shakti NGO, Gurumaa has recently instituted other programs with the same aim of educating girls and raising awareness.²¹¹

Taking flight

Gurpreet's spiritual journey in the late 1980s dictated that she take a literal journey, a solitary one, all over north India. She traveled for four years visiting many famous religious places, sitting with many teachers and seeking answers to her questions, and eventually achieving enlightenment.²¹² When Gurpreet fled from her home in Amritsar,

²⁰⁹ Marshall arts and meditation instruction as well as other yogic bodily practices are taught to Shakti girls (as they are referred to in the ashram), Gurumaa explained to me. The time I saw Shakti girls in 2009, they were being taught both meditation and postural yoga (yoga *āsana*).

²¹⁰ In order to be most effective, Gurumaa decided that funds would go directly from Shakti to the girls' school instead of going through families.

²¹¹ In addition to education through class 12, Gurumaa has begun offering tuition scholarships to needy young women studying at particular higher-education and professional training institutions such as SGTB Institute of Nursing Education - Ludhiana, her alma-mater, the S.R. Government College of Women - Amritsar, Shakti Udaan - Kaithal, Montessori Education Society - Delhi, Khushboo Welfare Society - Gurgaon. Information here comes from an internal source: the Shakti profile sheet used as a press release by Gurumaa Ashram.

²¹² I have heard different numbers of years for this journey, but I use "four years" here because I heard Gurumaa say this in a public discourse: *Amrit Varsha*, Kolkata, 30 January 2009.

she went beyond the boundaries of her home and city and the religious tradition into which she was born. Despite the precedence of such spiritual journeys and the casting aside of one's comfortable, predictable life, this journey was well beyond the boundaries of appropriate or proper behavior for a young woman growing up in North India in the 1970s and 80s. Gurpreet's journey, though it follows a tradition, breaks with it as well. The notion of a solitary spiritual quest and subsequent realization of the Self, of God, or of the attainment of enlightenment or Buddhahood, could fit into the hagiographies of countless numbers of contemporary gurus as well as those of rishis, sage-kings, *sants*, bhakti poet-singers, and founders in whose names "isms" would follow, like Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha. The great predominance of such figures making extensive solitary journeys across South Asia has been male.²¹³ In other words, such a flight from home is part of the master narrative of the Indian holy man, but not necessarily part of the narrative of holy woman. When a young woman sets out on such a journey, the stakes are often high.

Gurpreet (at this time wearing her self-prescribed all white attire) traveled in government buses and in general class seating on trains.²¹⁴ She encountered many people along the way who questioned her: "Why are you alone?" "Who is your guru?" Gurumaa explains today that she never felt alone. She would answer, "God is with me!"

²¹³ Mirabai is said to have traveled from Rajasthan to Vrindavan and then to Dwarka in Gujarat, where she disappeared at Krishna's shrine. Another contemporary female Hindu guru who made a solitary journey in her quest is Karunamayi Ma, whose parents are said to have known from the very beginning of her life that she was special and would challenge norms of womanhood to become a great *yogini*. Charpentier mentions Karunamayi Ma's journey in a section entitled "Going to the forest" (2010: 137-142).

²¹⁴ Gurumaa reminisced to me about days when she used to ride in "*sarkāri* buses" and on trains in general class seating, after my daughter and I arrived in Gurdaspur, Punjab. We had just reunited with Gurumaa and entourage after having taken the train across Haryana and Punjab from the ashram, a good portion of which we sat in general class seating, for us, making the trip into a grand adventure with stories to share. Gurumaa's words about traveling carried with them some nostalgia for the shoestring budget travel days when she was not always shuttled around in fancy cars.

(*Paramātmā mere sāt hai!*); “My guru is inside!” (*Mere guru andar hai!*).²¹⁵

What must her parents have been feeling during this time? Were they worried for her safety? Was the family honor at stake? Did they miss this daughter’s presence? Their daughter had chosen a path tread by many great sages in the Indian subcontinent over the ages, one of which some parents would be proud, if also greatly worried, to have their own sons follow. But she was a daughter, not a son. And striving middle class families in contemporary urban India generally do not make great sacrifices to get their daughter a good education in order for her to run off on a spiritual journey. Families do not always approve even when daughters (or sons!) renounce worldly life to join an ashram, where presumably, at least, they will be safe and their basic needs will be met. Itinerant spiritual seeking has its long historical roots in India. Historically and today, world renunciation (in *sannyās* or another form) is revered on one level and sometimes feared by “attached” loved ones at another. Consider the very early narrative example of Buddha-to-be Siddhartha, whose father, the king of the Shakya clan, kept his son contained within the palace walls to prevent his attaining the knowledge (in the form of the “four sights”) of the world predicted to cause him to flee aristocracy and embrace world renunciation.²¹⁶ Certainly Gurpreet’s parents, even though they had always been supportive of her all-encompassing spiritual life, would have been given cause for concern when their daughter left home on a spiritual journey with no specific intention to return. Referring to her early and continued “roaming” (as well as the hoards of people who overcrowded her parents’ home in order to visit her after she

²¹⁵ *Amrit Varsha*, Kolkata, 30 January 2009.

²¹⁶ At the time of the Buddha, there were *parivrājikas*, wandering seeker-renunciants, who inhabited forests and begged for food from householders. So there was precedent even before the Buddha for holy wandering and for forest dwelling ascetic teachers (Eliade 1958: 186-88).

returned from her sojourn), Gurumaa tells Charpentier in an interview that it was “hard for them” but that her family always had a sense of understanding that she had to have her “own space” (2010: 201).

Eventually, Gurpreet’s parents heard word that she was in Rishikesh, a city well known for its Hindu yogis and their ascetic practices. The family in Amritsar consulted a clairvoyant guide who confirmed for them that their daughter was in Rishikesh and that she was about to retreat alone into the “jungle” (or forests) of the Himalayas.²¹⁷ As many seekers have done before her, she was about to leave the world for the Himalayan wilderness, and they learned that she was going the very next day. In 2008, during the first week of my earliest research stint in India and extended stay in Gurumaa Ashram, Gurumaa called me for a private meeting. Speaking as a woman who does not see her life merely as her own but rather, as an extension of God, she explained to me during this encounter that she had *wanted* to go live in a cave in the Himalayas, but that the solitary life turned out not to be her destiny; rather, she was repeatedly moved in the direction of teaching others, “students kept coming.” Gurumaa’s devotee, Prema, from Amritsar, explained that right after Gurpreet’s parents learned of their daughter’s plans, a family member searched for Gurpreet in Rishikesh, found her and brought her home.²¹⁸

Gurpreet returned to her family home without struggle, but her family also made certain concessions. There was a renewed understanding on the part of the

²¹⁷ I put the word jungle in quotations because the disciple-storyteller who shared this part of the narrative used it in her English telling. The word “jungle,” a common Hindi-English word for forest (*jangal*) carries with it a connotation of being un-civilized. For instance, it can be used in a setting far from the forest to indicate an uncivilized (*jangli*) way of being. My storyteller perhaps used this word in her rendition to indicate Gurumaa’s parents’ perspective of the Himalayan forest as a dangerous place for a young woman alone.

²¹⁸ Prema’s own history with Gurumaa began shortly after this return.

family that this daughter’s spiritual life would take precedence over all else for her. In their modest yet comfortable family home, she was given a room of her own where she could engage in her spiritual practices undisturbed, and it was fully understood that she would not be coerced or expected to marry. She was now understood to be a mystic in a state of oneness with God and therefore God was all that she needed. There was not room in her life for marriage and family, she has always explained. Besides, to use her own more current language, who could meet her at her level anyway? In keeping with her very confident air, in public discourses, Gurumaa would later make it clear to those who listened that no man could match her.

Gurpreet’s early journey away from home in search of Truth serves as a fitting metaphor for breaking with tradition while engaging in the keeping of a good deal of it, something that I find many examples of today in the woman and teacher Anandmurti Gurumaa. Not only did she make her own version of the traditional Indian spiritual journey, and as disciples profess, attain her enlightenment, but also (as she does most of what she does) she did it “in her own way.”²¹⁹ Since Gurumaa teaches listeners coming from primarily Hindu and Sikh religious traditions themselves—traditions in which spiritual knowledge (*jñāna*) more typically comes from males—and does so in absence of institutional sanction or lineage (*paramparā*), we might surmise that Gurumaa does indeed do things “in her own way.”

Gurpreet’s return to Amritsar and the end to her solitary journey reflect her early recognition and acceptance of her role as spiritual guide. According to the story I have pieced together here from its narrative parts offered by guru and disciples, instead

²¹⁹ “In her own way” and the similar “in her very own way” are phrases another disciple, Aparna, used to express her appreciation for Gurumaa’s innovation and originality, demonstrated by her unconventional *sannyās* taken “forcefully” and “in her own way.”

of leaving the world (as she was tempted to do), Gurpreet turned back and integrated the “treasure” that she had found into her particular life in the world. This was a life surrounded by those who loved and nurtured her to that point, many of whom are still “with her” in various capacities today.²²⁰ As for the question, “Did Gurumaa turn back or was she turned back by others?” we might surmise that different answers to that question could exist depending on the teller and audience in each setting. I wonder, even, if Gurumaa looked differently at the event when she was age 25 than she does now at age 45, when her mission has come into clearer focus.

Convinced yet not coerced, the narrative goes, Gurpreet agreed to return on her own terms and in her own way. More than twenty years later, sitting in her Haryana ashram located at a point between the two cities of Amritsar and Rishikesh, Gurumaa would look back and narrate to me that not moving into a cave in the Himalayas was part of her destiny to teach others.²²¹ In my own reading of her narrative, it is in this very human return, returning to those who called her, to those who beckoned, to those in need of her guidance, that she integrated her spiritual life with her worldly dharma. One day her destiny may be to “leave all of this” Gurumaa has explained to others and to me directly. For now, she is still engaged in turning back to those who love her, not leaving them behind, and sharing the gift that she has found, an act which is understood by Gurumaa’s devotees to be the most compassionate act possible. From

²²⁰ Gurumaa regularly refers to her spiritual attainment as her “treasure.” Some of Gurumaa’s own family members live “with her” in her ashram and many others come to visit her there and support her mission and way of life. Some of her most senior householder disciples moved not into her ashram but nearby it so that they could remain “with her” and work in the ashram as paid workers. Gurumaa’s senior-most disciple, her Left Hand Man, was “with her” before and after the journey away from Amritsar, and remains close to her now, living in the ashram.

²²¹ The ashram’s location between Amritsar and Haridwar/Rishikesh is notable both for its accessibility from both locations where Gurumaa lived significant portions of her life and also, I would add, symbolically, for its location between great pilgrimage cities of Sikhs and Hindus.

this perspective, a devotee sees the guru's guidance (even when it comes in the form of scathing critique) as the guru's own devotional act or offering. In a discourse on the role of the guru, later transcribed into a book, Gurumaa explains to her listeners that every single action of a true master (*satguru*) is "... not for him but only for the benefit of others." She explains the guru's impulse to serve others along these lines, "just as his guru had awakened him, likewise, he too wants to return the grace he had received, by awakening others" (Gurumaa 2011b: 18-19).²²² Like disciples of any guru, Gurumaa's disciples feel immense gratitude to her for making herself available and for responding to them. Like Siddhartha Gautama, who faced the temptation to dwell forever in nirvana, but chose instead to teach, even returning to the ones he had once left, Gurpreet chose a similar path that would integrate the so-called dichotomies of otherworldly experience and worldly life in a body.²²³

Pechilis introduces contemporary female Hindu gurus in the context of their historical predecessors, taken from textual evidence of female religious preceptors in Hindu scriptural traditions. Her discussion includes various types of female religious and spiritual adepts such as philosophers, wives of sages, wives of gurus, wives who

²²² It is perhaps indicative of just how male oriented guruhood is that a female guru would use the masculine pronoun to describe the role. Or perhaps, more simply, the adoption of the male pronoun is an expedient way for Gurumaa to speak about the role of *satguru* generally. Had she adopted the feminine pronoun form here, her listeners might assume she is pointing to herself as *satguru* when her intention is speak in general terms about the role.

²²³ Of course, as the story goes, the Siddhartha Gautama also left a wife and child, complicating his selfless act (though stories relate that Siddhartha did return to the kingdom after finding nirvana, and family members joined the monastic and householder sangha). This sort of issue too can be worked out in narrative. Thich Nhat Hanh's version of Siddhartha's departure from his wife Yasodhara and son Rahula may be based on Buddhist textual sources, but it is no doubt infused with an understanding of the *bodhisattva* ideal. In this contemporary Buddhist narrative of Siddhartha's poignant departure, Nhat Hanh lays emphasis on prior conversations that he has narratively reconstructed between Siddhartha and Yasodhara that planted seeds to prepare her for her husband's destiny. Then, intuitively knowing that Siddhartha would leave on the full moon night soon after his son Rahula's birth, Yasodhara laid out appropriately simple and comfortable clothes for her husband's travel instead of his regular night clothes, facilitating Siddhartha's flight from the palace (Nhat Hanh 1991).

served as gurus to their husbands or sons, bhakti saints, and the Goddess. She stresses that the stories of female saints in Indian bhakti and tantra traditions often problematize the body; while in the stories of male saints it is often the mind that is problematized (2004a: 10). The female saints in Hindu traditions may have had a public prominence as exemplars of bhakti, but did not act as teachers. Even those who did teach, the female teachers we encounter in tantric texts such as the *Yoga Vasishtha* and the *Tripura Rahasya*, were represented as “gurus in the private realm of family” (2004: 26).²²⁴ These early images of female adepts in medieval texts, Pechilis writes, “served to establish women’s capacity for leadership; further they defined a set of characteristics and issues specific to women religious leaders, especially the relationship of religious commitment to women’s wifely duty or dharma” (2004: 26). This tension still existed for the earliest known female gurus, but in their stories these tensions are reconciled in various ways. The autobiography of Bahinbai (1628-1700) of Gujarat “directly addresses the conflict between devotion and wifely dharma.” But for Gauribai (1759-1809), the tension was allayed when she became a child widow (Pechilis 2004: 29). Similarly, Sahajo Bai, a nineteenth century saint to whom Gurumaa gives some attention in discourse and song, was “widowed” at her wedding before she even walked around the fire with her groom to be.²²⁵ Such tension and its reconciliation, between a woman’s religiously sanctioned domestic role (*stridharma*) and her religious or spiritual seeking, can also be seen in various ways in the stories of female gurus from the 20th and 21st centuries, as

²²⁴ Meena Khandelwal discusses many of the same female figures when she offers religio-historical context for her ethnographic research on contemporary female sannyasins in North India. See (Khandelwal 2004b: 36-43).

²²⁵ See chapter 2 of this work for more on Sahajo Bai. For the story of her uncle’s (also her future guru) timely prediction at the wedding ceremony that Sahajo Bai was not meant for marriage, and Sahajo Bai’s groom’s immediate and dramatic demise, see Gold (1987: 81) as well as Aveling and Joshi’s introduction to Sahajo Bai’s work of poetry, *Sahaj Prakash* (Sahajo Bai 2001).

evidenced in Pechilis et al. Reconciliations might also be seen to play out in the explanations of the female guru's married or unmarried state.²²⁶ When she is not a celibate ascetic, but married, then her husband is usually a disciple or subordinated in some way (Pechilis 2004).²²⁷

Gurumaa returned home. Then those people close to her at home and in Amritsar, in turn, supported her religious life in various ways while she offered her guidance to them. But to some, Gurumaa is understood—like the bhakti saints before her—as a figure who “overlaps with the ordinary social world, yet stands quite apart from it; this is why—some would contend—saints cannot be uncritically considered as models of the rest of us” (Pechilis 2004: 23). In some ways saints' achievements can seem unattainable, thus making them difficult to think of as models.²²⁸ Often standing out as extraordinary and understood as exceptions rather than models, what applies to the saints is difficult to apply to all (Hallstrom 1999; Narayanan 1999; Orsi 2005). This said, Gurumaa points to herself as an example, demonstrating that women can attain the highest spiritual state and that they can do so in this lifetime, in a woman's body. And as her story of returning to Amritsar tells her admirers, it is also possible to do so without running away (and staying away) from the world. Her life may tell us that

²²⁶ For a lucid introduction to the body, celibacy and sexuality in women's renunciation, see the co-written introduction by Khandelwal and Hausner to their co-edited volume in (Khandelwal, Hausner, and Gold 2006: 11-19). Charpentier, who found fewer dramatic stories of contemporary female gurus' reconciliation of domestic duty and spiritual calling than she had expected, took this lacuna to indicate that perhaps what had been a common medieval theme “was a product of the ideals of sainthood and hagiographical genre of the times” (Charpentier 2010: 35).

²²⁷ One example of such a “subordinated” male counterpart is Anandamayi Ma's husband, Bolnath; whenever he tried (early in the their marriage) to seduce his wife, her power would manifest and form an electromagnetic field around her so that he could not come close to her. Sometimes he would perceive “a spiritual aura around his wife which precluded all worldly thoughts from his mind” (Hallstrom 1999: 35). Other times, “her body would assume the symptoms of death” and he would have to chant mantras to bring her back (McDaniel 1989: 194). Not long after such incidents Bholnath became her disciple and attendant.

²²⁸ Hallstrom (1999), points out that Anandamayi Ma never advised her female followers to imitate her, but took, rather, the “do as I say, not as I do” tactic with her female disciples.

while solitary quests are valuable, indeed crucial in some form on the yogic path, integration of what is discovered in the quest is also possible, even desirable.

For devotees, the stories from Gurumaa's life history become, in a sense, texts. Gurumaa is a contemporary teacher who is only 45, and therefore, her biography has not yet been written. It is still being shaped.²²⁹ Stories are still gaining their meaning to disciples as they relate these stories to their own lives. And more stories (involving disciples) are daily being lived. Disciples yearn to hear of their guru's life, to learn any small fragment or story from it. They review these details over and again. They cherish this knowledge, they love to share what they know and they study and learn hers as an exemplary life, and then, they apply whatever possible portion of that into their own, different lives. All the while, a disciple's own particular life experiences also color her re-telling of the guru's biographical narrative. The living narratives inform and shape one another. We can see elements, even from this short fragment of Gurumaa's life story, repeated in the lives of some of her female disciples, particularly the courage to go off on one's own and the establishment of one's own space in a home. I found that even when I was asked (quite often, it seems) by Gurumaa's devotees to tell my own religious or spiritual history, that listeners would sometimes read the events of my life through the lens of Gurumaa's and repeat to me anything they could find that was similar in our narratives. I saw some of them doing the same with their own stories. Naturally, they sought to understand their lives through hers.

²²⁹ See Charpentier for a thoughtful discussion of hagiography, and how the process of biography and hagiography making occurs during the lifetimes of the contemporary female gurus' she observes (2010: 51-55).

A “lady guru” and a “ladies’ guru”

In *Suno Suno* and in speech, in pointing to herself as an example, Gurumaa offers her life as a story. It is a story in conversation with Indian religious traditions, and with sages, mystics, poet-singers, commentators and scholars within those traditions. Gurumaa has put her life into conversation with the lives of many predecessors, male and female from various religious traditions. In Gurumaa’s March-April 2008 issue of *Soul Curry* featuring “Women in Spirituality,” Gurumaa’s life is quite literally put into conversation with the lives of well-known female spiritual luminaries.²³⁰ In this particular issue of *Soul Curry*, Gurumaa is featured in the cover photo as representative of the list of five women about whom articles are written: Anandmurti Gurumaa, Rabia al Basra, Lalleshwari, Therese Neumann and Anandamayi Ma. Anandmurti Gurumaa is listed at the top and the only woman from the list currently living. If she had not done it clearly prior to publishing this magazine, here Gurumaa certainly puts her life story into conversation with the lives of other women we might categorize as “saints” from the Indian context and beyond.²³¹ Before this magazine’s publication, she had long been singing the songs of famous female Hindu bhakti poet-singers Mirabai and Sahajo Bai, putting her life in conversation with theirs, but with the March-April 2008 *Soul Curry*,

²³⁰ *Soul Curry* was a relatively short-lived glossy spiritual magazine that Gurumaa produced between the years of (2006 and 2009) marketed for spiritual seekers as well as for health and yoga enthusiasts, and it was hoped its reach would extend beyond devotees. *Soul Curry* presented itself in such a format as to downplay its alignment with any particular religious teacher. Gurumaa once told me that she writes almost all of the articles for *Soul Curry* magazine herself. However, many articles appear without authors’ names listed, (though some appear with Anandmurti Gurumaa or another author’s name), quite a frustration for a scholar trained in making citations.

²³¹ “Saint” is not a perfect word to use, but often the most useful cross-cultural indicator for a spiritual exemplar as well as the word most of my conversations partners in field research used. Scholars have been troubled with the cross-cultural use of the Christian-centric term as is Gurumaa, who in an early meeting with me explained why she is not a saint expressing the difference between saint and *sant*. Nonetheless, the term gets used cross-culturally, perhaps for lack of a better word. See (Kieckhefer and Bond 1988). For a helpful discussion of the use of the word saint in the Indic context, see (Hallstrom 1999: 88-92).

Gurumaa attempts to broaden her audience and to expand the landscape of female spiritual peers beyond bhakti poets to include a Sufi and a Roman Catholic.²³²

Revealing an understanding of her particular role as a spiritual guide, Gurumaa has made statements many times that she has taken a female body in this lifetime to demonstrate a woman's capacity for enlightenment. Similarly, Tenzin Palmo, a Tibetan Buddhist nun, has referred to her own initiatives helping other nuns within her tradition to face difficulties they encounter as minority renouncers, as being the purpose for which she was born a woman in this lifetime (MacKenzie 1998: 156).

Interestingly, before discerning her own mission, Palmo, originally from Britain, spent 12 years practicing spiritual austerities in a cave in the Himalayas, until the point that Visa authorities came in search of her and forced her out of her solitary quest.

According to Palmo's journalist biographer, Vickie McKenzie, due to this and other circumstances, Palmo "found herself thrust into the role of teacher," and "surrendered" to the fact that her life would be more useful to others as a guide (McKenzie 1998: 162-63).

Gurumaa speaks so frequently about gender, women's discrimination and women's empowerment that her publishing house compiled excerpts from discourses into video and print media, both under the title *Shakti* (Gurumaa 2006a, 2006b).²³³ Disciples laud her for "lambasting" traditional religions, and I find strong textual evidence in her writings and discourses to support their claim that Gurumaa is fiery in her critiques, especially in regards to the male dominance of traditional religion. She

²³² Sannyasinis in Meena Khandelwal's ethnographic research routinely referred to the stories of female philosophers, ascetics, poets and saints to legitimate their own choices. See (Khandelwal 2004b: 42).

²³³ Having told me that her earlier published versions were too soft (she blamed the translator for softening her language in the English version), Gurumaa released a revised edition in 2008, which she told me that she wrote herself (Gurumaa 2008).

contends that historically male “so-called caretakers of religion and duty” willfully interpreted scriptures to keep women down by continually telling them, “‘Because you are a woman, you are impure, therefore, you will never gain knowledge. You will not attain salvation.’ What madness is this!” (Gurumaa 2006a: 43-44).²³⁴ Here, Gurumaa speaks directly against Manu and other writers of Hindu Dharmic texts, but she also addresses religious misinterpretations by “caretakers” in other Indic religious traditions such as Buddhism and Jainism, who have denied women the same access to enlightenment as men. Interestingly, in the Sikh tradition into which she was born, women do have access to “salvation” apart from men. However, she criticizes this tradition too, for not progressing in gender equality beyond the original gurus’ lives and teachings. Gurumaa offers feminist critique of Abrahamic traditions in these volumes as well (2006a; 2008). Then, she points to herself to oppose such wrong interpretations, presenting her own enlightened female body as demonstration of women’s independent access to salvation (Gurumaa 2006a: 43-53).

Gurumaa’s public speaking is replete with references to the mistreatment of girl children in India, to their lack of equal access to education, to their lack of decision-making power, to their incorrectly perceived impurity due to menses, to their having to carry the burden of family honor (*izzat*) on their shoulders. I also heard reference to these same women’s issues from the stories of 7 grassroots village level NGO workers from north India as given to us by the Richa Nagar and the Sangtin writers group (2006). Gurumaa’s language struck me as similar to that used by the Sangtin grassroots activists working for change in rural women’s lives.

²³⁴ Interestingly, I hear here echoes of the language from New Age renegade guru, Rajneesh Osho, more than from female guru predecessors like Anandamayi Ma. See (Osho 2004). Gurumaa uses the terms salvation and enlightenment interchangeably.

Gurumaa's actions reflect common strategy with the Sangtin grassroots writer-activists, particularly in her inversion/reinterpretation of a festival that once celebrated the births of male babies to one that celebrates instead the new births of female children. In 2007, in Ludhiana, Punjab, Gurumaa introduced the practice of making cash gifts to families of female babies at the celebration of the festival *Lohri*, popular in Punjab. Similarly, the Sangtin activists in the Sitapur district of UP introduced an alternative for the popular festival *Gudiya*; in place of thrashing the *gudiya* (female rag doll), the activists instilled the practice of swinging the *gudiya*. So without "snatching away" a time honored tradition, they introduced changes from within it (2006: 92-93).

Whether Gurumaa is in India or abroad, she reads local papers and cites in her speech at that location examples of atrocious crimes against women in and near people's own communities. She wants her messages to hit home. For example, she does not shy of directly criticizing a Punjabi or Haryana audience because the child sex ratios (CSR) in these two prosperous states indicate the highest incidences of female feticide in the nation. She goes on to talk about an "imbalanced India" in which the shortage of girls turning marriageable age has led to new social problems for women and the nation. She refers specifically to incidents in which teenage girls are being bartered, trafficked and are sometimes serving large families as wife to multiple men. The nation cannot prosper without women, she tells us. When addressing a mostly middle class audience, she not only informs her listeners of these sort of material realities, but she does so in a "yes, I'm talking to you!" tone when she tells them "you must educate your daughters before you marry them!"

Making no reference at all to gender, I asked a woman sitting next to me at Gurumaa's *Amrit Varsha* program in Nagpur, Maharashtra what she liked about Gurumaa, and she replied that Gurumaa speaks to real women's issues, their emotions, and their real lives. I asked, "Is your husband here today also?" (expecting the usual "yes"). She answered emphatically, "No, she's a ladies' guru!" I looked around (in the VIP section where I sat that day) and 90% of the audience in that section was female. On the rest of the grounds women also outnumbered men, if only by a slight margin. I thought to myself, women always outnumber men in most Indian spiritual gatherings I'd ever seen or participated in. Gurumaa herself has noted this to me in conversation. So, what about Gurumaa makes her a guru for the ladies?

For at least half of Gurumaa's two-hour program that night, she spoke about the strength of women. In all the places where I heard Gurumaa speak in large, free public programs, and even in her smaller private programs, in cities large, medium and small including Nagpur, Gurdaspur, Pathankot, Kolkata, Delhi, Jaipur, she consistently put a good portion of her focus and energy into speaking about and raising awareness of women's issues. For instance, when she gave five days of *Amrit Varsha* talks (the usual length per city), she typically spoke for at least an hour about women's issues during one of her program's final days. I noted also that in each city her crowd grew nightly. So, if she spoke to 20,000 listeners on the first night in Nagpur, she was speaking to a significantly larger assembly by the fourth night when she addressed woman-centered topics and her Shakti NGO.²³⁵ In discourses I attended, I heard a strong echo of the

²³⁵ Gurumaa's Right Hand Man gave an estimate of between 35-50,000 listeners in attendance during on the last day of Gurumaa's *Amrit Varsha* program in Nagpur. All numbers are "guesstimates." Of course, this would also be the optimal time to inform potential donors about her NGO, and she typically does so in these settings.

nationalist “stronger women equals stronger India,” but Gurumaa’s tone is far from anything we might label Hindu nationalist, or Hindutva.²³⁶ In multiple venues, I heard words such as (paraphrasing and translating): *India will NEVER rise to greatness without strong women!* Gurumaa speaks of ancient times when women had more voice than they have had in the last 1000 years.²³⁷ One of the main points Gurumaa drives home to her audiences in various places is (paraphrasing): *You should not be so concerned about marrying your daughters. Let daughters choose for themselves to marry or not and concern yourselves instead with their education, thus enabling them able to earn for themselves. Life is not about marriage only.* In Nagpur, she continued, *Look, I am not married and I have a life.*²³⁸ In each location in India where I have listened to Gurumaa, she spends a good portion of her overall time there speaking on women’s power, women as the embodiment of Shakti and offering practical advice on how to raise stronger, more self sufficient daughters who have the capacity to earn for themselves and their families.²³⁹ She talks at length about how a good marriage is a total partnership in which no one in it is the boss.

During a teaching tour, Gurumaa was staying in the home of disciples in a small Punjab city. While I was sitting near, she addressed the young married couple of the family. She told the husband how he should treat his wife with more respect. And she

²³⁶ For work on Hindu women’s rise to power in politics and the place of Hindu symbolic motivations utilized for political agenda, see (Sarkar 1995). For a more recent study in an accessible and short article, see (Menon 2005).

²³⁷ Mandakranta Bose echoes this same sentiment in her edited volume, which highlights women’s lives as evidenced in primary textual sources from ancient, medieval and modern India. See the introduction to (Bose 2000). It should be noted here too that nationalist political agendas also point to an earlier time (before the influence of Islam in the subcontinent) when Hindu women’s spiritual acumen was less suppressed. I have not heard Gurumaa point fingers at the religious “other” in this way, however.

²³⁸ *Amrit Varsha*, Nagpur, February 18, 2009, also translated and paraphrased.

²³⁹ Gurumaa also talks a good bit about how to raise boys, how not to spoil them and to teach them respect for women.

advised the young wife on how she should treat him. She openly acknowledged to this young couple that the man's father (her host who was standing in the next room), a devotee of many years now, set a terrible example for his son to witness during childhood (all attest that he has since changed his ways due to his devotion to Gurumaa). She advised the young wife, that change could take some time because her husband would need to unlearn what he was taught in his own home. She emphasized to the husband that he would have to learn for himself how to treat his wife with respect, but in doing so, he would also set a better example for his own (still very young) son. Gurumaa instructed the couple to initiate better relations by making a simple, respectful gesture to one another; they should address one another with the suffix "ji."²⁴⁰ Gurumaa then looked to me and explained that Punjabi men can be the worst womanizers, but on the other side of that, they have large hearts. In other words, even they were not hopeless.

When it comes to women, their place in society, their rights as human beings, and their capacity for spiritual acumen, Gurumaa has spoken and continues to speak many words. Sometimes she takes the words of someone like Manu as her starting point, arguing against them without always making a direct reference. But her starting point is something intelligible to her audience of listeners. She argues with sages past, she speaks out in a new voice, with her "new instrument" on old and new topics and broadens the conversation, extending it to new partners. Not incidentally, it was Gurumaa's use of Western feminist rhetoric (and a powerful search engine) that first brought her to my attention when I was searching for a female guru research subject who spoke Hindi and did something to empower women. I found her by googling,

²⁴⁰ In Hindi, "ji" is an honorific term following a name to denote respect for the one being addressed.

“female+guru+hindi+empowerment,” and a site about Gurumaa’s Shakti NGO in the domain of gurumaa.com came up on my screen as first hit. Gurumaa’s discursive engagement with Western feminism—of course with the help of her team of techie-disciples who installed all of the appropriate “keywords” and “tags” into her website—also brought this would-be-scholar with an interest in “lady gurus,” into the conversation.²⁴¹ Regarding the purpose of her birth, there is no doubt in my mind that many of Gurumaa’s female devotees, inspired by her strong words of affirmation of their womanhood, would echo a sentiment heard from the devotees of Anandamayi Ma that “This time Ma has come for the ladies” (Hallstrom 2004: 92).²⁴²

*“A room of one’s own”*²⁴³

If I had not yet thought about the idea that Gurumaa puts her own life before others as an example, her own particular form as an embodiment of shakti, then I certainly thought about it once she put her own life as an example before me. Before I set out for fieldwork in India, I had been reflecting on Gurumaa for a long time in addition to other female gurus and their female charity recipients and devotees. Knowing that my academic training and ensuing fieldwork might not lead to clear cut answers about if and how female gurus empower the women they serve, I still could not help but want to

²⁴¹ I put “lady gurus” in quotations because almost any time one of Gurumaa’s devotee introduced me to another, I was introduced as someone writing about “lady gurus.”

²⁴² It bears repeating that Anandamayi Ma did not hold herself as a model, and generally because of her perceived divinity, most devotees held her as an exception rather than a model for ordinary women. See Lisa Lassell Hallstrom’s work for a discussion of devotees’ various understandings of why Anandamayi Ma came as a woman (2004: 91-95).

²⁴³ The subtitle of this section was adopted from Virginia Woolf’s famous essay by the same title. Woolf based her essay on a series of lectures she gave to women’s colleges at Cambridge University in 1928, where she asserted that in order for a woman to succeed as writer, she would need a room of her own and 500 pounds. It seems an apt metaphor to use here since Gurumaa stresses the material needs of girls along with her own life’s example of taking a room of her own.

know what it means to female seekers today to have found their “idol of bliss” (*ānanda-murti*) to be a contemporary woman living among them. In research proposals I presented some of Gurumaa’s strong words about women and their capacity for enlightenment as I did earlier in this chapter. And I was left wondering, “What do Gurumaa’s powerful words of reclamation mean in the lives of her privileged cosmopolitan followers? Do these women also feel a need to reclaim power at multiple levels in their own lives?” Charity recipients of Gurumaa’s or other gurus’ educational initiatives do receive something material to aid in their overall evolution, education. And thus, according to her own figures, Gurumaa could be said to have gifted 750 girls the empowerment of an education to 12th standard, which in her opinion is the first step toward accessing one’s own power.²⁴⁴ I cannot make broad claims about how Gurumaa’s or any other female gurus’ words and actions empower their female devotees and students. But perhaps we can begin by looking at ways in which Gurumaa’s own life story affects this latter group. We may gain insight into the question proposed if we observe how the female guru’s life itself (a biography in process) enters into conversation with the life narratives of those in her listening audience.

²⁴⁴ 750 girls is the statistic given on Gurumaa's website as the number of girls who received funds for their completion of 12th standard “last year.” It does not say how many achieved that goal nor does it say how many received funds in past years. It also does not specify if this is a running tally or a 2010 benchmark. All of this is unclear. See: <http://www.gurumaa.com/girls-education-shakti-2011.php> (accessed 27 December 2011). I have also seen numbers given in the thousands to indicate how many girls have received benefits of the program. This number may include recipients of all Shakti funds, for secondary schooling as well towards professional degrees (through particular Nursing schools and schools in Pharmacy studies) or towards B.S. and B.A. degrees at Gurumaa’s alma mater, the S. R. Government College of Amritsar. It may even include local village schools within the ashram district that received somewhat informal instruction in the use of computers in the early years of Shakti (a program for which the ashram's own “tech team” served as teachers). It is also quite possible that the larger number includes figures from newly established institutes under the umbrella of the Shakti NGO such as a vocational school for girls in Panipat, Haryana called *Shakti Udaan* (*uṛān*- the words together mean “flight of power” or “power of flight”) and the Computer Education Training Institute in Jalandhar, Punjab.

By pointing so straightforwardly to her own life as a model, to her own embodied shakti as something towards which other women can aspire, Gurumaa puts her life in conversation with lives of her listeners—and I have been a listener for almost six years now. From the very beginning of our relationship, Gurumaa has pressed me (most of the time gently) to address a long neglected spiritual side of myself. In the spring of 2008, I followed Gurumaa to Gurdaspur, Punjab to see her give 5 nights of *Amrit Varsha* discourse programs to crowds of approximately 35,000-40,000. Shortly after traveling to Gurdaspur independently with my then six-year-old daughter, I was identified by disciples in town after checking into a local hotel and was put in accommodations in a family home closer to Gurumaa.²⁴⁵ My daughter and I were brought to Gurumaa and visited with her privately in a small sitting area in her quarters.²⁴⁶ Gurumaa wore a bathrobe, and was about halfway made-up and dressed for her program that was to begin elsewhere shortly. During these days in Gurdaspur, she would address me very informally and sometimes very personally. It was in this setting, her wearing her bathrobe seated on a chair and I sitting on the floor with my daughter drinking chai and eating *chāt* (a popular snack of the region) in the home of Gurdaspur disciples that I first recognized the fact that Gurumaa addressed me and saw me primarily as a seeker, above and beyond any other role in which I might have been seeing and identifying myself. There, Gurumaa said pointedly to me, *If I can become*

²⁴⁵ In other words, I had not traveled in Gurumaa's entourage from the ashram. However, the foreign mother and child traveling alone were identified quickly in the small town. I must admit that I was somewhat relieved by our capture at the end of a day spent sorting through dingy hotels and settling on one of them. The owner of our hotel was a devotee of Gurumaa and had called Gurumaa's Right Hand Man, who swiftly sent a car for us.

²⁴⁶ Gurumaa's living area in this home included space for her sister, who serves as her personal attendant, as well as a private sitting area where she could take her tea. It was into this intimate setting we were brought. At other times during the week, we would sit with Gurumaa in the family living room, which had been converted into a space for *darshan*.

*enlightened, if a human could become Buddha, so can you. The problem is that you see yourself as different, as unable or undeserving of this. If I can do it, you can... I am here to make it easier for you.*²⁴⁷

Some months later after processing it all at home, I realized that I probably belong in a sample selection of Gurumaa's intended audience. She believes that what she has to say has relevance to lives such as mine. And in Gurdaspur, she pointed to herself, to her own body, sitting in a bathrobe, as an example for me to see that a living human can reach the ultimate state of realization, can become a Buddha. She was saying that her state is accessible to me. If I could sit and take a cup of tea with someone who is a Buddha, she was telling me, then I too could become a Buddha.

Here I was, empowered with higher-education and in a position to travel internationally, a self-assured Western traveler competent enough to find Gurumaa in a fairly remote part of the country with young child in tow, yet she saw me as someone not yet capable of seeing that enlightenment was available to me, as someone not yet able to recognize and know her own shakti. Though it is obvious that Gurumaa intends to help underprivileged girls in India get their education and get empowered through that material means, she spends most of her time speaking to well-educated listeners (some of whom become donors to the Shakti program) who may be empowered in some ways, but not in others.

Gurumaa attempts to awaken her listeners to the reality she teaches through her own body, that women can and do reach the highest state. "Look at me," she said to

²⁴⁷ The italicized words come directly from my fieldwork journal, recounting the incident from memory later the same day (14 March 2008). At the time of writing the words, I could not remember whether she had said "a buddha" or "enlightened," but she uses both words regularly to depict a self-realized, fully realized, awakened human being, and to describe herself.

me that day in her bathrobe. “Look at me,” she says to women and men everywhere. She sings out “Listen! Listen! Listen! Listen to my voice... I am shakti. I am woman.” Gurumaa is not shy. She is not necessarily even humble, though her disciples claim her to be. She stands independently in her state, whatever that is and whatever people see it to be, exuding confidence in who she is and what she is and where she comes from. Some disciples see her as Durga, others see her as Radha, others see her as Krishna. A male Sikh devotee in Mohali explained “When Gurumaa walks into the room, it’s as if Guru Govind Singh himself has entered!” So for many, not surprisingly, her figure, her form—in addition to embodying “bliss” (*ānanda*)—denotes power.

In taking a room of her own in her parent’s Amritsar home for her spiritual practices (*sādhana*) Gurumaa sets an example that many of her followers have emulated or would like to emulate, both literally and figuratively. For most, living in joint family or nuclear family settings, extra space in a home is scarce. But finding quiet, private space for meditation (*dhyāna*) and other yogic practices like breathing exercises and postural yoga (*pranayāma* and *āsana*) is also an ideal for the modern spiritual aspirant espoused by a number of contemporary gurus including Gurumaa. I met disciples of Gurumaa in cities including Jalandhar, Ludhiana, Rishikesh, Delhi, Jaipur and Mumbai who were setting aside certain rooms or areas in their homes for meditation. Most of the time, the meditation room or area could serve dual functions, both as a very private space for meditation or yoga *āsana* practice and as communal space for the family’s worship (*puja*) at the home temple (*mandir*)—a space certainly not unknown to female religious expertise.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁸ Numerous scholars have written about women and domestic religious ritual in Hinduism, from the standpoint of women’s “folk” traditions. Susan Wadley took the lead in identifying women’s folk religious expertise with her now decades old seminal study of women in north India, co-authored with colleague

In a spring 2009 visit to Gurumaa's family's Amritsar home, I was able to see the room of her own from the days when Gurpreet returned to Amritsar as Swamiji, now modestly preserved on the top floor of this home. I was really struck by the privacy and simplicity of the space. I learned from the disciple who accompanied me that during the time Swamiji was living in this room, a devotee might wait outside of the room for hours in order to be invited in because in those years, having just returned from her flight, Swamiji spent much time in heightened states and private devotion. The family home sometimes became crowded with devotees waiting for Swamiji. In a recorded interview with Charpentier, Gurumaa explains, "I had my space. I always had my space because I know that we have to create our own space, so I was creating my space, always. But it was hard for them." (2010: 201).

In 2009, Gurumaa invited me into her private home within Gurumaa Ashram, and she referred to this newly built home of understated luxury as her "cave."²⁴⁹ While we sat together in her beautiful foyer, I wondered what the rest of her home was like. A month or so later, in Amritsar, I would see her original "cave" or room of her own, and notice the differences in appearance, but likeness in function. The newer, fancier "cave" was the same in that it was private. One has to be invited in and one might still wait for quite some time. Even so, devotees who have seen most of Gurumaa's current home

Doranne Jacobson. In this early work, Wadley asserts that alongside women's lack of authority in Brahmanical Hinduism, that "within the domestic sphere women are vital religious practitioners who have developed a subsidiary religious realm of largely folk, or local, non-textual traditions" (Wadley 1977: 127). Inspired by this notion, a number of scholars have explored women's expertise in domestic religious practice, particularly in the performance of vows and fasts (*vrata*) and of story telling associated with *vrata*. See the following: (Falk and Gross 1980; Gupta 2000; McDaniel 2003; Narayan 1989; Pintchman 2005; Raheja and Gold 1994; Ramanujan 1991; Wadley 2008).

²⁴⁹ She added, that it was "a cave with good lighting." Interestingly, Swami Paramahansa Yogananda, who had also wanted to flee to the Himalayas (but divinely ordained circumstances continually made it impossible for him to do so), established his own "cave," a private space in the attic of his family home (Yogananda 1947). Gurumaa has come into contact with Yogananda's narrative (at what point in her life, I do not know) as evidenced in a *Soul Curry* article on Therese Neuman that references and seems to get a good deal of its information from Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi*.

convey that one part of it remains completely private to this day and accessible only to Gurumaa, the room where her shrine (home *mandir*) is. So even within the home that devotees built for her, she continues to create and maintain her own space, a room of her own.

Only two days after seeing Gurumaa's Amritsar room, I visited a disciple in Jalandhar who proudly showed me her home *mandir* and meditation space, a small room with doors for privacy that had been added to the roof level of her home. It sits next to open air space for urban views and drying laundry, and it struck me immediately that her space was very similar to Swamiji's Amritsar "cave" in its privacy and in its location near the top of the home. Similarly, the poised Jalandhar woman who kept the shrine and used this room often had recently informed her parents that she has no interest in marriage, and rather, needs the time and space for her spiritual practices (*sādhana*). Hers is a room available to all, but it is strictly preserved for spiritual practice, thus most of the time it is a room of her own. Like Gurpreet, she has created her own space. Similar to the narrator of *Suno Suno*, this young woman in Jalandhar has "found a new path" (*naī rāh milī hai*) and is not letting anyone (potential marriage prospects or, most particularly, her parents' interest in them) "block her way." Instead of moving permanently into the ashram, which she sometimes considers, she seeks to integrate her spiritual life into her life in the world with her family. She has created a flexible work life that earns for her and her family and allows time for *sādhana* at home in Jalandhar as well as freedom to make frequent trips to Gurumaa Ashram.

Another devotee, in Rishikesh, created a meditation room in her home. A mother of two children, she has taken advantage of the time created by having her sons in a nearby boarding school to focus intently on her *sādhana*. This spiritual aspirant coming from the Sikh tradition like Gurpreet, has followed Gurpreet's lead to sit with many teachers from various traditions. Her location in Rishikesh has facilitated her ability to study with teachers associated with the Hindu tradition. If someone asks her why she wants to sit with so many gurus and saints, she reminds them, "Gurumaa did the same thing. She sat in the presence of many many realized souls." Her husband (at the time living in the US where employed), also a devotee of Gurumaa, once received a call from some concerned Sikh friends who reported to him that his wife was wandering around Rishikesh and Haridwar wearing a white *chola* (robe that comes to the floor) and sitting with yogis. He responded that his wife is seriously on the spiritual path and that what she does is her business, laughing heartily later about the call with me. His own spiritual journey guided by the same guru in a very different way, he nonetheless understood his wife's need to chart her own course. And it likely helps her a great deal in doing so that she can refer to this course as modeled on that of hers and her husband's own guru. This female disciple's own models before Gurumaa were the ten Sikh gurus and various local saints and Sikh *bābās* (literally "fathers," but denoting here spiritual models and teachers), all male models. Among the many saints' faces in photographs that adorn her home and inspire her practice, Gurumaa's is the sole feminine face. Though she was not looking specifically for a female guru, admiring a female who has risen "to great heights" from within the honored Sikh tradition has enabled her to envision and live her own "*new path*" in her very own way integrating

with it her domestic roles and responsibilities.

Many disciples (both male and female) have answered my questions about what it means to have a female guru with words to the effect, “the guru is beyond gender.” The answer did not surprise me; I had expected to encounter something like this and was nearly ready to drop the question altogether.²⁵⁰ Sitting with three women and one man in Jaipur, all devotees of Gurumaa and self-described seekers (*sādhaks*), I raised my almost-abandoned questions and discussion ensued in which one of the women admitted that on one level, it does help her a great deal that Gurumaa is a woman. Because of this, she can go to her guru's ashram a lot, and do so freely without censure from her husband or family, who might otherwise have concerns for her vulnerability in spending copious time with a male guru who could be out to take her money or exploit her sexually. In that moment it occurred to me that I too could relate to this level. As I sat there on my own in India, with the constant realization that my husband was back in the US managing two jobs and caring for two children, having spent much time following around a guru and living in her ashram, I realized that my husband and family probably also take some comfort in knowing that this guru is a female.²⁵¹ Other women in the room began to admit: *Yes, there is no way my husband would have let me go to that 30 day retreat in the ashram had my guru been a male. We were not even allowed to make phone calls!*” or *“Of course I get spend more time with her because she’s a woman!”*²⁵² Gurumaa’s own words, in a publication created from her talks in Mumbai, indicate that sexual

²⁵⁰ See Khandelwal’s own reflections on gender and the “ungendered” soul in (Khandelwal 1997).

²⁵¹ I guess one could say this comfort is an imagined comfort, yet it may remain part of the master narrative of the female guru, that she is safer than her male counterpart. Lower numbers of controversies among female gurus may support this notion, but this too would be difficult to quantify. First there are fewer female gurus, and have been over the course of history. Second, the role of running an ashram and overseeing massive funds, a role susceptible to various scrutinies, is a role relatively new for women.

²⁵² The italicized words are paraphrased from fieldnotes.

abuse in the guru-disciple relationship remains a prevalent issue, at least for some of her listeners. In this discourse, Gurumaa expresses her gratitude for having been given the body of a female so that she can better address women's needs in her country, then she states: "Listening to me, so many women have not only written letters but have also come to meet me personally saying that the person whom they had made their Guru had physically abused them, telling them that the Guru is always right and must be obeyed implicitly. I am not just speaking of one or two instances but scores of them" (Gurumaa *n.d.a*: 58).

The reality for the women sitting in that small group nodding their heads (and for me) is that taking time away from domestic roles is not an easy thing for any householder much less for women to do. Just integrating career responsibilities with domestic roles is challenging, not to mention the risk inherent in a female's surrender to a male Master. Women give to their families. They give to their careers. But on the spiritual path, householder women give something to themselves. Many women might ask, "Can I take the time just for myself?" In her life example and in her words, Gurumaa says, *Yes, you can and you must!*

During our conversations in 2008 in Gurdaspur, Gurumaa urged me to begin the practice of meditation, beyond my ashram stay (ie. not just for the sake of good "participant-observation"). She told me directly, pronouncing her words slowly and emphatically, "Do it for your self. Make time for yourself." When I returned to her ashram in 2009 (without child) Gurumaa gave me the "once over" looking me up and down to check me out again and said, "So, you've come alone." She paused and said, "Good for you!" She was the only person in the ashram at the beginning of that

research stint who did not express disappointment that I had returned alone. All others longed to see the daughter who had accompanied me on my previous trip. But Gurumaa, who first had been generous in allowing me to bring a child to the ashram and then had shown her great affection, reinforced instead that it was good for me to be on my own. Leaving my family for many months for research had been particularly difficult for me, wrenching in some ways. Yet, I knew at a deep level that my temporary flight from domestic duties would be liberating too. Gurumaa's words of greeting in my independent state, "Good for you!" rang in my ears not only as an affirmation that there was something in this solo journey that was good for me, but also an acknowledgment that Gurumaa wanted me to make progress on the spiritual path, that she saw me like she sees any and every one who comes to her, as a seeker.

Many of Gurumaa's female students, from those in their twenties to those well into retirement years, travel alone or with a female companion to Gurumaa's ashram. Some come for short multi-day programs with children in tow (usually sitting in the back of the audience in case they need a prompt exit or with someone to help them with child care). When the time comes for intensive meditation retreats (*shivirs*) or Gurumaa's highly selective, long retreats of thirty or more days called *Dhyaan Dhoot* (literally, messenger of meditation), the majority of participants have been women who take a temporary break from their domestic responsibilities in order to do something for themselves.²⁵³ Children are not allowed in the ashram so that parents can focus on their *sādhana*. Gurumaa once told me that even though children under the age of twelve

²⁵³ I use the ashram spelling for *Dhyaan Dhoot*. It should be noted that a likely reason for low male attendance in these long retreats is that fewer males apply due to the fact that nearly all of Gurumaa's male disciples work full time jobs with limited time off whereas a many of her female disciples do not work outside the home.

are not allowed in the ashram, they still sometimes “get dragged here by their mothers.”²⁵⁴

Home from the field in early 2010, I shared these stories with a Gurumaa devotee who lives in Ithaca, NY. To my surprise she responded to the stories I narrated by exclaiming that she had purposefully looked for a *female* guru. She looked for a woman, she explained, because she knew that she had a lot of work to do on the spiritual path and that she would need to devote much time, and that all of this would be easier if her guru were female.

Perhaps then there really are some logistical advantages for a female aspirant who finds a female guru. For many women, if the guru with whom one spends much time, to whom one constantly listens, upon whom one constantly reflects and remembers, to whom one lives near or travels periodically, is a woman, practically speaking, it *does* make things simpler. This is especially true for a female spiritual aspirant living in a domestic-centered phase of her life or as a student. Householder women today are challenging and expanding so-called boundaries and expectations of their religious roles. In this regard, today’s prominent and public female gurus—changing the master narrative—have broken a glass ceiling of sorts for female spiritual aspirants looking for a model. Women are creating new spaces for their spiritual lives, outside of their homes, inside their guru’s ashram and in their own “caves”—private spaces for devotion and yogic *sādhana* such as *dhyāna*, *āsana* and *pranayāma*. In an era when householder women have female gurus as models, learning and incorporating

²⁵⁴ When she spoke these words it was in the context of the “no children below 12” rule being the reason why the ashram store did not stock white robes (*cholās*) for children. Gurumaa has seen a need to make accommodations for children for short programs. At the celebration of Ravidas’ birthday (2009) she asked parents to keep a careful eye on their children (especially because of the ashram’s lake) and stated to her listening audience (many of whom had traveled just for the day from Delhi or nearby cities in Haryana and Punjab with their families) that coming soon, there would be a play area for children in the ashram.

yogic practices may come somewhat easier to them than it did in previous ages in India, or anywhere else for that matter.

Women in India are lauded in popular imagination as bhakti virtuosos, something that their domestic focus primes them for. Women have long been understood to be inclined toward *bhakti yoga*, to be inherently good at it. And therefore, in India women are often said to be “more religious” or “more spiritual” than men. Even in situations when women’s roles have existed only in the home, women have kept the rituals in the home. In addition to the more visible domestic role of family priestess, there is some social sanction for women’s private religiosity. With the *gopis* of Vrindavan— in both their motherly and passionate love for Krishna—serving as the archetypal female *bhaktas*, the expression of devotion for the Divine Beloved through various emotional stances, moods or states (*bhāva*) has long been an appropriate and acceptable spiritual path for women. It is an indicator of our “New Age,” however, that women en masse have begun to train in and teach yogic *sādhana*. Responding to a female disciple’s question about how (and if) householder women can (and should) do *sādhana*, male New Age guru Jaggi Vasudev not surprisingly acknowledges women as the traditional exemplars of bhakti, who have “carried on their spirituality quietly, in the secrecy of their hearts.” Then he speaks of *sādhana* as being something newly available to women, the performance of which is therefore apt to bring about tensions in her home.²⁵⁵

As women have entered the work place, their domestic roles are already in flux, a tension in and of itself. Notwithstanding the need for *sādhana* in their lives, Gurumaa

²⁵⁵ See the short video clip on YouTube of Sadhguru (aka Jaggi Vasudev) speaking on this topic of women in the current age doing *sādhana* entitled, *Women and Spirituality*, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uFC84zpj13M>.

speaks about contemporary women who already work “second shifts” in their double roles as both provider and caregiver.²⁵⁶ Everywhere women try to find balance between their roles as earners and roles as caregivers. Now women also seek integration between these roles and their spiritual seeking and ensuing discipline. This classic tension exists in the lives of seekers in general, and in this age, it exists poignantly for female *sādhaks* whose religiosity is expanding to include practices not originally designed by or for women such as postural yoga (*āsana*) and other yogic *sādhana*.

I met women in cities across north India who had incorporated yogic *sādhana* into their busy lives already full of responsibilities to family and career, and the integration they sought and achieved came in numerous patterns. I met women whose children were already settled or away from home at school, leaving them more time, and making it easier for them to integrate new spiritual practices into their lives. I met women whose husbands’ traveled and lived in far off places for work (in the army or in the middle east), leaving them open blocks of time for ashram visits. I met widows for whom *sādhana* has become the main focus of their lives whether living inside or outside of the ashram. I met retired couples that engage in *sādhana* together.²⁵⁷ I met some women who were in the process of choosing not to marry making their spiritual quest the higher priority in their lives, like Gurumaa’s devotee in Jalandhar.

To be fair, it must be acknowledged that not all the women I met found ways to incorporate Gurumaa’s prescribed spiritual discipline into their daily lives. But this I found equally true for some male devotees. Of these devotees, most found time to

²⁵⁶ I heard this language in informal darshan talks in the ashram and in *Amrit Varsha*, Kolkata, 31 January 2009. See also *Soul Curry* (vol. 2.2, March-April 2008) p. 37.

²⁵⁷ I met one couple who live inside the ashram full-time, devoting their retirement years to full-time spiritual seeking, their own new version of *vanaprastha*.

meditate, but had a difficult time adding the yoga āsana that Gurumaa so greatly stressed to their routines.²⁵⁸ A number of these women who did not incorporate all of the prescribed *sādhana* in their lives took daily refuge in listening to Gurumaa’s teachings and music while they cooked or performed other household chores. A young mother living in Delhi explained that in the beginning [of her relationship with Gurumaa, who was first her husband’s guru] she would dance to Gurumaa’s music with her then two-year-old young son just because the music was there and it was fun. She found that over time, the words and the messages sank in. She began listening to discourses with more intention, and eventually, she too became devoted to Gurumaa and after which she had no choice but to incorporate *sādhana* into her busy life.

That Gurumaa is reaching a younger generation of educated women with her voice is evident in the number of educated women in their twenties living in Gurumaa Ashram as full-time residents. Many of these women have just finished their education and primed to work or marry or both, yet they choose to live a celibate, austere and simple life focused on their goal. It is true also that some of these women come and go from the ashram, ultimately finding their place on the “outside” (*bahār*), choosing to struggle through the tensions inherent in worldly life (*samsāra*) and find balance in the householder life, a life that Gurumaa compares to a battlefield.²⁵⁹ Whether choosing to

²⁵⁸ Teaching and preaching the practice of meditation has been a prominent focus throughout Gurumaa’s entire mission. Yoga āsana and other hatha yoga practices were emphasized later, after Gurumaa determined that she needed to give firmer guidelines for more disciplined lives to her seekers. When I asked Gurumaa why she turned her attention towards hatha yoga to the strong degree she has in the last decade, she replied: *If water turns to vapor at 100 degrees, I must have already been at 99 degrees. It took very little exposure for me to reach that point. But for “you people” at about 3 or 4 degrees, I have to keep giving you various methods to try.* Gurumaa repeatedly tells her listeners that for today’s stressful world in which everyone finds himself or herself running in the “rat race,” hatha yoga āsana and *pranayāma* are essential *sādhana*.

²⁵⁹ I refer here to Gurumaa’s words to me about the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna’s words to Arjuna and how life on the outside is “not easy” and is in fact a “battlefield” (Darshan discourse transcript, Gurumaa Ashram, Gannaur, Haryana, audio recording: 18 November 2009.)

live a renouncer's life in an ashram or living outside in the world, a true seeker, Gurumaa says is a *sadhu*, one pointed straight at the goal.²⁶⁰

Among the many different women I met who listened to Gurumaa's voice, Shakti's "new instrument," I met one in her twenties from Mumbai who had been visiting Gurumaa Ashram with her parents since she was a teen and then doing so with more frequency while finishing her PhD at Delhi University in close proximity. Her recent wedding invitation included an announcement that the couple requested donations to Gurumaa's Shakti NGO in lieu of wedding gifts. From this early moment in her householder life, she is demonstrating that her ideals are in tune with those of Gurumaa. And whether or not the in-laws are Gurumaa devotees, they certainly seem less concerned with bride wealth than they are with educating girls.

A female devotee's living history may or may not have narrative overlaps with that of her guru's. And certainly not all gurus point to themselves as models. Even some of Gurumaa's devotees will utter statements like, "oh she too high, too high!" to indicate how far above themselves she is. In this sense the guru becomes transcendent, extraordinary and unreachable and thus the guru's life is not a model to be followed. In the Indian tradition, the guru (or God) can be, as Gurumaa so nicely points out, one's "bosom friend" as in the case of Krishna to Arjuna. With the voices of female gurus and female disciples growing ever more powerful in our digital age, master narratives are indeed being reworked. Guruhood has been a boys club, but it is no longer that. Female gurus in general and Gurumaa among them are creating a new space for women as specialists in 21st century Indian spirituality.

²⁶⁰ *Sādhaka* (Hindi *sādhak*), *sādhu* and *sādhana* all come from the same Sanskrit verbal root, *sadh*, to reach one's goal.

Ushering in a New Age, music video style

A liberated soul having taken flight, as Gurumaa projects herself to be in *Suno Suno*, is one free of artificial constraints, restrictions and boundaries, and who lives in the world without being trapped or tied down by social norms. If Anandmurti Gurumaa can move beyond boundaries to talk about where tradition has failed women, or to speak on topics most gurus stay away from, male or female, such as sex, then I suppose it is in character for her to produce and perform in a music video intended for a vast, unknown, unlimited audience.

While he was mixing *Suno Suno* in the recording studio, Gurumaa's disciple and partner in music production, her Left Hand Man, revealed the intention to create an inspirational music video from the song to inspire girls. The video (released while writing this) was widely distributed on DVD, and also made available to the Internet-connected world on YouTube on November 15, 2010, is professionally done.²⁶¹ The beginning of the video, co-produced by Gurumaa's record label *Mystica Music* and Shakti NGO, bears the Central Board of Film Certification seen at the start of all Indian films. Gurumaa, wearing black, stands mostly off center at the edge of the screen singing.

Through stance, gesture and a little video magic, Gurumaa points not only to herself, but also to the many female exemplars her video offers to the viewer.²⁶² There is nothing visually signifying her as a guru to someone who didn't know her as such. Instead, one's attention goes to other manifestations of shakti from joyful school girls wearing uniforms doing acrobatics on a playground, to the whirling modern dancers

²⁶¹ See on YouTube at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5WUKADddFwc&feature=relmfu>

²⁶² Some of the faces in the video I recognize. I had met before the supermodel, Jessy Randhawa, whose whirling form takes the center stage at various points throughout the video in choreography that strikes me as yoga meets modern dance meets Sufi Sama. Model and actress, Rhea Pillai, known also as an instructor in Art of Living, figures prominently as well, seated in meditation. Both women have also been interviewed in *Soul Curry*, Gurumaa's short-lived glossy New Age magazine.

led by supermodel Jessy Randhawa, to a law enforcement officer and her badges, to the seated meditator (Rhea Pillai), to a female scientist in a lab, to a female astronaut, to a mother embracing a daughter in the child's bedroom, to an artist standing next to her creation, to a girl dribbling a basketball and to a woman wearing a construction helmet appearing to be the engineer in charge. The video is not intended to inspire devotion. It might, but it is likely not the first video ardent devotees will choose watch over and over. It is meant not for darshan of the guru but rather to inspire change. It is meant to promote the cause of female education, to inspire donors to give so that needy girls get educated, and to inspire all girls to aim high and to occupy important roles in society in addition to their roles as mothers. At the end of the video, Gurumaa's form shrinks into a small square framed video image joined then surrounded on all sides by likewise minimizing frames of the other female role models whose narratives were expressed throughout. The sole voice behind the multitude of fading female faces in frames is the feminine voice of Gurumaa, the self-designated voice (*avāz*) of Shakti.

This New Age is one in which a female guru's voice is not only heard, but also broadcast around the globe. This is an age in which the voice of a woman from Amritsar might be heard by people from anywhere in the world at any time. This is a world in which a female spiritual leader can travel freely across boundaries and borders to places her mother and grandmother perhaps never dreamed of going. Gurumaa's stage is a global platform upon which female religious leaders broadcast their voices and their embodied forms to those who will listen and see, utilizing not only internal websites but also social media. This is an age in which one's potential audience is ever expanding through time and space. It is an age in which women's voices will not be

absent from recorded history.

Ours is a New Age in which urban women in India and around the world are practicing spiritual arts and discipline not previously intended for them. Gurumaa's disciples looking for balance and integration in their lives are turning to ancient yogic practices devised by and for men. It is an age in which a young woman can choose to live a celibate life in an ashram and then change her mind about it later. Gurumaa tells us it is an age where this young woman can choose whether or not to marry and that she has the human right to choose her partner. Gurumaa uses her voice, a "new instrument" enabled by shakti, as Shakti, to call out to others. To Indian girls in need of schooling, to potential NGO donors, to ardent devotees, to a PhD student and mother from the USA, to all listeners (and now readers), Gurumaa sings out "Listen, Listen!" and she offers hope of a new age that is dawning, a "new world" she wishes to "light up."

CHAPTER 6
New Media, Same Old Magic: “This is the *siddhi*”

Introductions

Amrit Varsha: the rain of nectar²⁶³

Gurumaa’s latest released music plays over the loud speakers dispersed throughout the tent (*pandāl*) as the audience slowly grows and each person finds a seat. White-robed volunteers (*sevādars*) organize shoe-less bodies into near-perfect rows of cross-legged listeners, seated on the sheet covered fairground floor. Just below the stage in a carefully separated space, the recording takes place: IT specialists sit at computers; another white-robed disciple stands at the video camera; and another takes still photos with a long zoom lens. Traditionally trained musicians sit on the ground in this space too, with tablas, sarod, and flute. Gurumaa’s Right Hand Man, nearby and ready, is in charge of the recording as he has been from the beginning, and her Left Hand Man will play the flute and direct other musicians. Both of these senior students of Gurumaa are well trained in reading her body language and subtle cues to indicate what she wants from them when she sings and talks. After some time of listening to the loudly played newest songs and waiting with anticipation in the intense Indian heat, the audience of many thousands becomes still and quiet as the guru walks onto the stage to take her upholstered seat in front of her electronic keyboard.

The guru closes her eyes. Waiting continues as she picks up the pile of letters and questions placed at her seat—sometimes reading from this pile, sometimes closing her eyes again. Her first words are often sung, if not the verse of a well-known poet-

²⁶³ *Amrit Varsha*, introduced earlier in this study, is the name of Gurumaa’s live public discourses offered around the globe. *Amrit Varsha* is the name of her TV show as well as the live performances in various locations.

saint or her own verse put to music, then maybe a Sanskrit invocation. Her extemporaneous discourse lasting up to two hours begins after “tuning” hearts and minds through music and sacred verse. On one of her 5 evenings in this locale she will likely begin by offering responses to some of the questions *sevādars* have collected and neatly stacked next to her seat on the dais.

Every word this 21st century mystic speaks in any public setting is recorded. Devotees back in the Gannaur ashram will type up the transcripts and edit audio and video files to be re-presented in new forms such as television shows, Hindi and English language printed books, magazine articles, pamphlets, brochures, audio CDs, DVDs, YouTube broadcasts and stream-able Internet video for the internal website. These new incarnations, “spin-offs” of the guru’s praxis, re-present the guru’s word and presence and serve to broaden the “conversation” in which Gurumaa engages.²⁶⁴

“Lo Behold! We have Live Chat:” Q and A in a New Age

*See the master online and smile,
Hear her magical words and sway,
Seek knowledge from the ocean divine
Or just drop in silence and get blown away*

*The meeting place for a master and disciple
Was a huge banyan tree in days of old
Now we connect through the internet
And let the same divine magic unfold*

*The Lord said ‘May there be light’
and the sun began shining bright
The Buddha said ‘let’s assemble online
And lo behold! We have Live Chat’²⁶⁵*

²⁶⁴ I have adopted journalist Renuka Narayanan’s language here. Narayanan writes about television shows as the “spin-offs” of New Age gurus’ “praxis” in “Bhakti on Toast,” *The Indian Express*, August 18, 2002.

²⁶⁵ <http://www.gurumaa.com/chat>. Accessed 21 July 2008. The separating line here was also on the website.

Previous chapters have introduced informal settings such as darshan sessions and spontaneous discourses. These too, like Gurumaa's public performances such as *Amrit Varsha*, are recorded for future use whenever possible. I was struck very early in my fieldwork experience by the fact that Anandmurti Gurumaa rarely ever opens her mouth without having someone (in the official capacity to do so) turn on a recording device of some kind, from small digital handheld recorder to hi-tech video equipment.

A day or two after my initial arrival in Gurumaa Ashram, my mother, daughter and I were whisked away from dinner by a messenger from the guru. This was our secreted "invitation" to join Gurumaa for "Live Chat," a fairly intimate and private conversation, yet one conducted at the global level through the latest Internet technology. This particular event required utmost silence, and therefore, its occurrence in the ashram was kept quiet.²⁶⁶

Surrounding Gurumaa in this conversation, on the ashram side, monthly Live Chat participants included a select group, made up primarily of Gurumaa's team of techie-disciples who divined this Internet miracle in the middle of rural Haryana wheat fields, where in 2008, power outages occurred with regularity and Internet connections were often spotty and slow.²⁶⁷ Indeed, lack of consistent Internet connectivity was a cited reason for stopping Live Chat after two years of holding monthly chat sessions.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁶ As was sometimes the case when being called to join the guru, we were unclear as to what we were being called for; we understood only that we were being called to Gurumaa and that we had best proceed immediately.

²⁶⁷ Internet access was not made available for ashram visitors during the years of my fieldwork and only ashramites whose *sevā* assignments had them working with Internet seemed to use it at all. When I used the Internet while living in Gurumaa Ashram, it was from a USB modem I carried with me for use on my own laptop. There is a sense that Internet does not belong in ashrams and I heard this sentiment voiced by a colleague at the AIIS guesthouse who responded to my complaints about not having Internet with words to this effect: a real ashram wouldn't have Internet, anyway.

²⁶⁸ Gurumaa conducted Live Chat from numerous locations wherever she happened to be, some places in which Internet connections were easier to maintain than in the Haryana ashram. When I participated, breaks in the flow of the chat were common and sometimes frustrating for those involved. Gurumaa took the "breaks" in stride and used the opportunity to engage with those in her actual presence. At the time I

In my experience with these events in 2008, this was a rotating group of participants on Gurumaa's side of the chat, including: IT and sound/video specialists (ashramites and non-residents) as well as ashramite office personnel who had been identified as fast and accurate English typists, though not necessarily part of the "tech team." On occasion, as in the case of our invitation, Gurumaa would invite one or two ashram guests to observe the scene silently. Any and all of these roles in the room were highly sought after by those in the ashram who learned about the event. Beyond the ashram, participation required registration on gurumaa.com and a somewhat reliable Internet connection.²⁶⁹

We in these privileged roles sat on the floor just below Gurumaa's stage waited for her arrival. She greeted all when she entered the room, but the Internet connection seemed good so no time was wasted and action began. There in India, Gurumaa sat in front of her large iMac computer screen (with built in camera), and began chatting over the Internet with disciples who sat at their computers in America, Canada, Australia and UK.²⁷⁰ In the ashram two or three typists sat upon the stage near Gurumaa's feet. Heads down with eyes simultaneously focused on the laptops before them and Gurumaa above, these new age scribes typed as fast as they could to keep up with the guru's spoken word, in this medium, mostly English then Hindi.

participated in Live Chat, Gurumaa was in the process of moving her tech team out of Delhi offices (where they worked with faster Internet connections) into the ashram itself, aiming for all of her work to be conducted "in house," as she put it. This transition has now occurred, indicating that the Internet access there must be improved.

²⁶⁹ Before this invitation, I had not participated or observed either end of the conversation called "Live Chat." Transcripts made available of chats from 2006-2008 at gurumaa.com (no longer on the website) would indicate that Live Chat participants outside the ashram numbered from 10-30 people, usually on the higher end of that scale. However, this number does not indicate the number of registered participants (a number I do not have access to). I suppose there may have been participants who merely observed the chat and did not type any words to Gurumaa.

²⁷⁰ She is also being video recorded by her tech team with camera on a tripod, as she is most any time she speaks to a large audience.

On her computer screen Gurumaa silently read the various greetings and questions coming in from multiple seekers in various locations. Scanning devotees' live words as they rolled onto her screen, she selected particular questions to answer. In the audience, we did not see the devotees' words as they appeared on the computer screen, nor did we know what they were; we heard only Gurumaa's responses, much like hearing one side of a telephone conversation but also not unlike the way Gurumaa addresses individual questions from the notes stacked next to her seat at *Amrit Varsha* events, in such a way that her words will have the widest possible application to all the listeners, not only the questioner.

Midway through the session, during an Internet outage, Gurumaa asked me, *Are you a fast typist? You must be a good typist.* At her behest (an upward nod) another laptop was pulled out and set up for me on the stage near Gurumaa's feet. There I sat, quite nervously, carefully observing the young woman from the "tech team" skillfully typing next to me while simultaneously offering terse instructions for my new assignment of typing the teacher's "live" responses to her students. Devotee's words rapidly filled the confusing laptop screen before me; I fixed my eyes on Gurumaa instead. My fingers ever at the ready, I watched her face carefully for a nod directing me that it was my turn to transcribe her words. Having secured my attention, Gurumaa would then turn to the web cam, address her questioner by screen name and speak.

Somehow despite the nerves, I rose to the occasion. Not long into this process, Gurumaa applauded my typing speed and accuracy, sternly directing other typists to take note. These typists, mostly in their twenties and from Delhi, were highly educated and possessed excellent English language skills. Though their English writing skills

were fluent enough for them to serve as Gurumaa’s editors and their spoken English as good as mine, they had not been typing in English on US keyboards for more than 25 years as I had. And thus, I found myself invited to participate regularly as English typist, rather than observer, in more Live Chats. In critiquing her regular typists, Gurumaa showed concern that her words be accurately portrayed to the students on the other side of the conversation, a concern I heard her voice in other contexts too. One of the main problems with “isms,” she would tell me a few weeks later in a darshan session, was that those people surrounding the master have misrepresented what that teacher was saying. Over the years, these misrepresentations grow bigger and bigger like weeds overtaking a garden.²⁷¹

I learned very quickly through my “participant-observation” of Live Chat that Gurumaa’s media engagement went far beyond the simplistic view I had taken of it before fieldwork. This particular use of Internet media had very little to do with selling anything and perhaps had nothing much to do with attracting new followers, two common functions of Internet media for religious groups, which at that point, I had noted gurumaa.com to concern itself with.²⁷² The objective of Live Chat was clearly to make Gurumaa accessible to *her people*. In making her accessible, the “new” medium of Live Chat served, along with other new communications media to be discussed in this chapter, a very “traditional” function – to transmit the guru’s Word. Having become scribe and experienced the nervousness of being put on the spot to type the master’s

²⁷¹ Darshan discourse transcript, Gurumaa Ashram, Gannaur Haryana: 3 March, 2008.

²⁷² During Live Chat, Gurumaa sometimes mentioned that so and so CD has just been released or that CDs can now be downloaded via the *Mystica Music* website. However, many of these statements are in response to questions and it should be noted that she mentions this to a captured audience who is very much waiting for this information. In announcing these available products to this audience, she is advertising, but she is also saving herself multiple responses to questions such as: “When is the DVD of the Sufi *shivir* coming out?”; “When will *Yog Nidra* be available for download?”; “Can I use a debit card on the site?”

words, to capture them correctly under pressure, put me in the (bodily) position to see this 21st century media form in the context of *guru-bhakti*. From my nervous position at the feet of the teacher, I saw Live Chat as yet another method utilized by yet another sage to transmit teachings to students in an effective and timely format relevant to her particular setting. The nature of the newest interactive multimedia Internet technology, however, allows for transmission of not only the guru's word, but also her live visual and virtual presence. Ironically, this new virtual conversation allowed for connection between the student and teacher in a somewhat more material way perhaps than "making the link" in meditation or "dialing the guru's phone number" through mantra repetition.²⁷³

Some messages in the Live Chat conversation sent to Gurumaa were short greetings between student and teacher in which the student would offer *pranāms* and report on progress or ask a question. Sometimes conversations were sustained over multiple virtual chat sessions, while sometimes conversations continued from past meetings that occurred in physicality. Sometimes introductions were made between student and teacher. Sometimes devotees made requests to Gurumaa in this format, entreating her, "Gurumaa ji, please make a stop over in our home in Thane when you come to Mumbai." Sometimes students requested that Gurumaa teach them about a certain text. Gurumaa's 71 DVD series on the *Bhagavad Gita* was a response to such a request made by a student during a Live Chat conversation.

This chapter examines Gurumaa's digital Word and "electronic presence" as it is re-presented in innovative Internet media.²⁷⁴ Contending that religion is "[r]ight up

²⁷³ These quoted words come from devotees and have been discussed in Chapter 2.

²⁷⁴ Here I borrow Smriti Srinivas' term, "electronic presence." For an excellent discussion of electronic and virtual presence of Satya Sai Baba on the Internet that draws on both Babb (1995) and Beckerlegge

there with sex and commerce” as a major use of the Internet, in an insightful and comprehensive article spanning religious traditions, Gwilym Beckerlegge outlines a number of common uses of religious web sites at the turn of the 21st century (2001). Each of these uses, I have found pertinent in some way to my study of Gurumaa’s embrace of Internet media. Indeed, my very first encounter as the scholar among Gurumaa’s devotees in 2006, as noted in Chapter 1, I was told that at gurumaa.com, I could get “everything” I would need to know about Anandmurti Gurumaa.

Indeed, I found this Hindi speaking female guru, research subject and conversation partner via Internet search that took me right to gurumaa.com. At an early point in my research, I had been embarrassed to admit to colleagues that I had discovered my research subject via Google. In February 2008, I met Gurumaa’s techie-disciples who shared smiles with one other upon learning it was their carefully chosen and planted “keywords” in the website’s text that had landed me in their guru’s ashram—that is, along with the powerful vibrations understood by *guru-bhaktas* to emanate from Self-realized masters such as theirs capable of drawing seekers directly into their magnetic fields (even those unaware of their seeking). My embarrassment faded when I realized the import of my search methods in our current context and the role of the tech team in re-presenting and packaging their guru, her words, her image and her mission to the world via the Internet. Gurumaa’s team has grown and has greatly expanded her reach since the days when she had only her Right Hand Man to disseminate her words. If only Sanjay had been able to “Google it” to find Gurumaa twenty years before, he might have been “found” more quickly. And had Ravindra heard

(2001), see Smriti Srinivas (2008: 104-108). Her findings conclude that the experience of “electronic presence” may be a possible reality for some devotees because multimedia can evoke and create a dense sensory response.

Gurumaa's commentary on Nanak's *Jap ji Sahib* after the time Gurumaa's tech team had come of age, the search for his Gurudev would have ended more quickly as well.

For several years I have been observing Gurumaa's "virtual presence" alongside her physical one and there is much evidence at gurumaa.com to support Beckerlegge's list of "typical ways" in which religious web sites are used (2001: 234). At gurumaa.com, one will find information relevant to insider "participation in religious activities," one will find products for sale – "commercial services" – meant to support practice, "support for study of religion," and plenty of "information for inquirers." These and other uses cited by Beckerlegge a decade ago have become the life's work of Gurumaa's full-time new age scribes and tech team. The media image created, maybe be presented in a style that suits this scribe-audience and those who listen most to Gurumaa, but at the same time, this living guru insisting the work be done "in house" keeps an eye on her own profuse, if greatly aided, output.

Gurumaa certainly uses new media to sell teachings and spiritual wares on the Internet. She and her organization are not unique in doing this among Indian gurus or spiritual and religious organizations, more generally. Other scholars have focused on the entrepreneurial spirit of gurus and other New Age teachers in our current era, and this is important, but it is also important to remember that the consumption of spiritual commodities of various sorts have been central to Indian spirituality for quite some time. A mix of commerce and religion in India is certainly nothing "new." The *New York Times*, and Aravamudan offer critique of gurus like Swami Chidvilasananda for her organization's sale of \$108 prayer beads (2006: 262), yet do not mention the symbolic significance of the number or acknowledge the high demand for such a

product by this guru's captive audience—one often eager to support their guru's ashram and her efforts in the world through such sales. Likewise, I might also critique the \$90 Amma dolls for sale at amma.org, but if I fail to note the relevance of a doll for its devotional use as *mūrti* or the symbolic value of dolls created from the fabric of the guru's clothing, then I miss something important in the conversation on *guru-bhakti*.

Gurumaa and her mission, via gurumaa.com and the latest social media technologies, also utilize the Internet for the purpose of casting the net to the widest possible audience, no doubt seeking the promotional ends cited by Beckerlegge as a typical use of the Internet by religious groups.²⁷⁵ However, I remind readers that Gurumaa's and other Indian gurus' sage forebears also utilized the media available in their own contexts to promote their words and their missions. Sales of consumable media help fund Gurumaa Ashram's regular expenses and expansion as well as the further dissemination of the teachings and to support the cause of educating underprivileged girls.

Importantly, innovative Internet media also serve traditional ends for New Age gurus and their disciples. Gurumaa has allowed those close to her to record her teachings through currently available media. In one context, those around the sage would memorize as Ananda did for Buddha. In another, they would write as Bhai Gurdas penned the verses of the early Sikh gurus. In another, they would type. In our own age they make audio and video recordings on digital devices. From the perspective of those devoted students sitting near the guru, in all of these contexts, Word is recorded as Dharma, as Shabad or as Vākya for the purpose making their particular teacher's verbalized revelatory experience of the Truth available to those searching for and

²⁷⁵ Beckerlegge focuses on the World Religions covered in the textbook from which his chapter is a part.

receptive to that knowledge.

In addition to the promotion and sales of new media sold at gurumaa.com, which offers material support for the overall mission of the guru, Gurumaa's media serve another important function for her audience of devotees who anxiously await each new media output, connection and opportunity for virtual proximity. For instance, Gurumaa's *bhaktas* purchase discourses they just heard live so that they can review them again to reach the deeper layers of meaning within her words. They dance and sing to her musical recordings.²⁷⁶ They listen to discourses on handheld electronic gadgets that may also contain darshan photographs to use devotionally. Gurumaa's face provides the "wallpaper" or screen saver for countless computers and cell phones. Devotees seek the guru's verbal guidance in meditation through audio CDs that take them through varied techniques. Gurumaa presents a number of meditation methods for her audience, "gimmicks," she explained to me, for getting people into the habit, and for helping people "to go in." Offering variety, because, as she puts it, people's dispositions vary, Gurumaa offers a dozen or so of these tools for disciples in which the guru's voice guides the listener through invocation, prayer, introductory words, all set to instrumental New Age music created by her Left Hand Man. She offers such innovations for disciples to use as they begin the journey of training their minds.

What a scholar might call a commodification of ancient techniques, a spiritual seeker in Gurumaa's fold might see as a useful tool. Devotees frequently check

gurumaa.com for new short videos published there and to watch *Amrit Varsha* discourse

²⁷⁶ Gurumaa has established a record label, *Mystica Music*, which from my understanding is a "commercial venture," for the stated intention of supporting the ashram. It is a separate entity from the trust that does this formally, Rishi Chaitanya Trust. *Mystica Music* produces a number of artists in classical music in addition to the music of Anandmurti Gurumaa. *Mystica Music* seems to attempt to reach a larger audience than the captive one of Gurumaa's devotees who will also buy spiritual wares produced and published by Rishi Chaitanya Trust.

or another special program being “streamed” live. They also use the website to check Gurumaa’s calendar of events, to find out when she will be near or to determine their next ashram trip. More recently, Gurumaa’s tech team added a reservations portal to the website. It is clear that Internet and all new media serve devotional ends for Gurumaa’s community. It became clear also while visiting disciples’ homes that Gurumaa’s media holds a special place in people’s lives. Some devotees prominently displayed Gurumaa’s cassette tapes, books and newer media such as audio CDs and DVDs in their homes alongside her photographs. My taxi-driver and conversation partner, Gurmeet, used the cardboard CD sleeve from a recording of Gurumaa’s discourse as a dashboard darshan photo, and put her face right next to Guru Nanak’s. Many seekers used Gurumaa’s meditation CDs regularly and some also convened with other *sādhaks* for group meditation guided by Gurumaa’s voice, communing with the guru while also creating community and *satsang*.²⁷⁷

The latest media allow for interaction between student and teacher as well as for interactions between students. In “Q and A,” a website feature that took the place of Live Chat, registered seekers may submit questions to Gurumaa through her website. Once a month, on camera she answers a number of these questions briefly (sometimes before a live audience in her ashram) to be broadcast in separate short videos organized by topic at gurumaa.com, for anyone to access. In the virtual space provided by gurumaa.com, registered devotees offer comments and *pranāms* below Gurumaa’s responses to various questions.

²⁷⁷ This happens both formally in Gurumaa Meditation Centers and Gurumaa Video Centers (entities sanctioned by the ashram and noted in publications) around India and informally in India as well as in other parts of the world. At Gurumaa’s “centers” throughout India, devotees gather to participate in weekly *satsang* with Gurumaa via streaming video from the ashram.

Social media, such as facebook, twitter and YouTube each add new elements to Internet community to indicate the existence of a virtual satsang. Gurumaa posts aphorisms as well as photographs she has taken, and representatives from her ashram post announcements and *bhajan* videos from live performances onto her profile pages as well as promotional video clips advertising new albums. Social media allows for easy sharing of songs and spoken Word between “friends” as well as the release of Gurumaa’s digital Word into overlapping networks throughout the “connected” world. Facebook “friends” of Anandmurti Gurumaa and Gurumaa Ashram (both facebook profile names) regularly connect to one another for the purpose of sharing inspiration, photographs and songs.²⁷⁸ Furthermore, Gurumaa’s devotees who sometimes meet one another for the first time on facebook become “friends” through the medium of social media, connecting and establishing new relationships and supporting one another’s *sādhana*, by virtue of the fact that they are on the *guru-mārga* with the same teacher. Such virtual connections are not so unlike the connections made on the path of *guru-bhakti* generally – a path upon which mutual disciples often call one another *guru-bhai* and *guru-bahin* (guru-brother and guru-sister) – bringing to life what an anthropologist might call a 21st century fictive kinship.

Gurumaa utilizes social media for the purpose of getting messages across to her students, for offering instructions as well as for posting inspirational words and aphorisms for deeper contemplation. The facebook profile, Gurumaa Ashram, posted the following instruction on facebook in 2011:

²⁷⁸ Gurumaa’s devotees on facebook seem to make full use of social media for their devotional purposes. It is also, however, worth noting that I have been in contact with devotees who never use facebook because they find it to be a distraction from their *sādhana*.

A disciple is one who follows discipline. So if you are one then are you keeping a sadhana diary? in which you write down how much time you have given to mantra jap, asana, dhyana. Begin writing now if you haven't started yet do it now.

June 27 at 11:45am via iPhone (Facebook user profile Gurumaa Ashram).

Here are a couple of responses to this post from “friends” of Gurumaa Ashram:

Seema Mishra I did write for sometime, but now ensure that I do my quota of yoga, pranayam, dhyana, yoga nidra and japa.

June 27 at 12:06pm · Like

...

Priyanka Upadhyaya gurumaa, aapko pranam. thanks for this wonderful idea, hum kitna time kitna kuch facebook / text / emails mein likhte hain, but none of it is as important as this. thanks

June 27 at 2:41pm · Like · 1 person

...

Sangita Agrawal THANK YOU!!!!!! MAA! THANKS A LOT.....FOR GREAT IDEA..... WITH LOTS OF GREAT.....GRACE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Tuesday at 3:15am · Like

Neela Chavan ok. for me it is necessary

Tuesday at 4:31am · Like

Bhavesh Bhatt jai gurudev...will do

Tuesday at 5:40am · Like

Biswajit Mohanty Maa Darshan do

Tuesday at 9:58am · Like

In a more recent facebook post, Gurumaa offers words on anger: “When things don’t happen as the ego wants – it gets angry: so bigger the ego more angrier you will be. Try being soft on others and see things clearly and keep your big I deflated. Then why would anger arise? Gurumaa.” To this post, 236 “friends” of Anandmurti Gurumaa responded with “like,” 38 friends left comments (friends can then respond to one another’s comments with “likes” or more comments) and 24 friends “shared” the post with their friends, which means that they re-posted the words onto their own facebook profiles making them accessible to their audiences of friends. Anyone in that second layer of

audience can then share with other audiences, infinitum. Indeed when digital Word is packaged in the format of social media, it has a new power of movement. It can reach new potential audiences, serving a promotional agenda while at the same time it serves devotional as well as community-building ends.

Looking at the promotional aspects of Internet media, an important usage that Beckerlegge terms “recruitment,” from the bhakti perspective, allows us to examine the role new media play in serving (what we have already observed to be) the guru’s own attractive power. Gurumaa has utilized various media to offer her teachings and thus promote them, widening her audience, as well as to serve her already captured or attracted audience, her community. Internet communications, therefore, nurture the guru-disciple relationship as they simultaneously transmit the guru’s Word and presence to new audiences. I remind readers of Gurumaa’s words from more than a decade ago at a time when the recording she referred to was analog recording onto audio and video cassettes (quoted more fully in Chapter 1), this time, with my emphasize added in italics:

“Once there was a time that I won’t allow anybody to record my talks.... But then *time changed* and I accepted the power of electronic media that *it can reach a far wider audience*. I allowed the recordings and left the responsibilities of sincere listening on people. Today in different cities and even different countries my discourses are being aired. You switch on your T.V. and there I am *trying to hit the jackpot* by making way in your heart so as *to sow the seeds of love*, divinity and spiritual hunger.” (Gurumaa pre-2000: 9-10).

Allowing others to record her words, Gurumaa does so in the hopes that she will “hit the jackpot.” A decade or so later, this “old time farmer” has fully embraced the “power of electronic media” for the purpose of sowing “seeds of love” in unknown hearts throughout the globe. Like words of sages from many ages before, hers are words cast

out into the great “ocean divine” like a message in a bottle, waiting to be opened by the receptive seeker. We can call such utilization of media “promotion” (and it is that), but we must also try see it in its larger context, as an example of how contemporary gurus engage in acts of transmission to whichever available magic (*siddhis*) they gain access.

Magical powers

In a Live Chat transcript (April 2006), afterwards made available – for a time – on gurumaa.com, the following conversation transpired:

Sarada: Gurumaa, It’s so nice you are in London yet Chatting with All of Us.

Amol: Maa, eagerly waiting for the Sufi Dhyana when will it be released?

Anandmurti Gurumaa: to all ... it is hard to be a hi tech guru

...

Anu: Gurumaa, do u like foreign countries?

Anandmurti Gurumaa: Anu, I like bhaktas like you wherever they are.

...

Anu: maa is that true that the saints have sidhies, by which they can make any magic

Anandmurti Gurumaa: Anu, bilkul [absolutely] saints have sidhhis, see talking to u right from london this is the siddhi (bracket and gloss added).²⁷⁹

Now consider words, a few years later, from another teacher making full use of innovative media. In an audio discourse to students in a Zen retreat center in Idyllwild, CA (April 2010) published later via iTunes Podcast, Lama Marut (formerly known as Brian K. Smith, a scholar of religion) shares the following words as he urges his students to see their own privileged status and to stop waiting for what they think of as magic – “unicorns” and such – to engage seriously in their seeking:

Siddhis are what you get in advanced stages of your practice as you move towards the end. They say you get magical powers. You get powers like the ability to communicate with people at long distances. You get the powers of being able to, like, to see things far away – to know what’s going on in

²⁷⁹ Accessed via gurumaa.com on 21 July, 2008 at <http://www.gurumaa.com/chat-transcript-apr-06.php>.

Afghanistan, right now. You see, you get powers like *that*. Do you have powers like that?... We could go through them. You get the power to move quickly through space. You can go from LA to New York in 4 and a half hours. Is *that* a good enough *siddhi* yet?! ...(Emphasis indicated in the originally spoken words).

Lama Marut continues in this Podcast, explaining that Master Patanjali, if we could somehow bring him into our world today, would think all this “stuff” we have, “computers, iPods, iPads, iThis and iThat,” are *siddhis*.²⁸⁰ Patanjali talked about omniscience (*sarvajñā*), which literally means to know everything, he adds, and then contends, “We are very close to being able to know anything. I’ve got two words for you, ‘Google it!’... If that doesn’t count as omniscience, you see, what does count?!” (Marut, Idyllwild Podcast, April 2010).

There are strong parallels between Gurumaa’s and Lama Marut’s embracing of modern day *siddhis* for staying connected to their own students, not to mention their embrace of their public roles as spiritual teachers and the wide casting of their nets through extensive media use for promotional ends. Like New Age Indian guru, Jaggi Vasudev, and Lama Marut too, Gurumaa has a text-messaging service to which students may subscribe, that offers pithy statements for daily reflection, reminders to stay on task with spiritual disciplines and occasional notifications of upcoming events. Gurus like these three present innovative contemporary versions of the traditional sutra, offering aphorism through Internet social media; at least some New Age spiritual teachers now “tweet” words for students’ study and contemplation.²⁸¹ And they do so in a way that allows for instant access and immediate response of their students, while at

²⁸⁰ Though Lama Marut is promoting the “stuff” here for its use as *siddhis*, he regularly (as he does later in this particular podcast) stands on the soapbox of denouncing the American religion of “consumer capitalism” as key ingredient in the overwhelming prevalence of depression in this country. During these gentle tirades, he often points to his listeners’ perceived need for the latest iThis and iThat.

²⁸¹ The sutra’s most recent innovative media incarnation before these was perhaps the “gem.” Nearly all guru organizations at some point published “gems” uttered by the guru, aphoristic statements for current students which have been published in calendars, posters and small booklets of “Gems.”

the same time, those sutras may be released into the global space of the World Wide Web, accessible to those “friends” and “networks” of their current students.

Lama Marut’s comments about the *siddhis* highlight something distinct to our own age, a somewhat more democratic nature to *siddhis*, available not only to gurus and highly advanced yogis, but to all global middle class seekers for whom Internet access and gadget use is available. Seeking and finding has become easier for all parties involved. This could prove to be both helpful and distracting for teachers tossing their messages in bottles into the World Wide Web.

The wider the net is cast, the more fish get caught. “Hitting the jackpot,” or catching the prized fish, in other words, comes at the cost of catching other less appetizing ones—those less seriously inclined students. Perhaps this may be the source of Gurumaa’s own bemoaning of the masses of “passive listeners” and “followers,” those she puts in contrast to “active listeners” and “real seekers” when she makes her well-worn statement, “I want seekers, not followers.” In putting the task of “sincere listening” on the people themselves, this televangelizing and web-evangelizing Indian guru – not so unlike the American scholar-yogi-cum lama – holds the hope that among the many listeners merely entertaining themselves by way of Sony TV, YouTube or various other social media that her word will reach a serious seeker and take root.

Tossing the bottle or casting the net

Inherent to the act of tossing a bottled message is an unknown audience. Consider for a moment an Indian sage like Adi Shankaracharya (8th century C.E.). Would he have, could he have imagined someone like Gurumaa repackaging his hymns and sharing and

stories from his life in another age? Likely he was well aware of a potential audience in the future, perhaps even one much different from the ochre-robed “twice-born” male bodies of *sannyāsis* he initiated and who sat near him. Even if he had been able to imagine a female Indian sage singing *Atmashtakam* for a global audience, could he have imagined a white recording artist and New Age spiritualist like Deva Premal doing the same?²⁸² Would the 11th century Shaivite from Kashmir, Abhinavagupta, who took the initiative to date his work (possibly frustrated by unsigned and undated Tantric texts according to scholar, Mark Dyczkowski) have imagined that white yoginis in American hatha yoga studios would be studying his words in a new age?²⁸³ Would these teachers – probably also concerned with accurate transmission of their teachings – have taken advantage of the new *siddhis* of our age if they had them at their disposal, as Lama Marut’s comments on Patanjali might suggest?

Here I offer a relevant story from folklore of how Shiva’s secret teachings to Parvati were received by the famous Nath yogi, Matsyendra. I tell the story, including different renditions, for its relevance to the current argument. Shiva was offering secret teachings of yoga to Parvati next to a body of water (in some versions a river, like Ganga, or the ocean). In one version of the story, Parvati writes down her Lord’s teachings, but drops them in the ocean where they are swallowed by a fish. The great yogi-to-be (Matsyendranath) was a fisherman in another age who cast his net wide and caught the fish containing the teachings. Matsyendranath is also the fisherman who “caught” a student in a future generation (Abhinavagupta himself).²⁸⁴ In another

²⁸² Adishankaracharya is the ascribed author of *Atmashtakam*.

²⁸³ Mark Dyczkowski offered this observation in the context of teaching Abhinavagupta’s *Tantraloka* (Romulus, NY July 2009). This occurred at the end of Dyczkowski’s summer teaching tour, during which he taught seekers interested in Kashmir Shaivism in a number of different American yoga studios.

²⁸⁴ The notion that Abhinavagupta had been “caught” by the great fisherman Macchanda (another name

rendition, one told by Swami Satyananda Saraswati, Parvati notices a large eavesdropping fish in the nearby water that had heard Shiva's secret teaching of yoga in its entirety, and so she informed her Lord. Shiva then turned the fish into a man, who became Matsyendranath, the great yogi and "originator of yoga."²⁸⁵ In some versions, Parvati falls asleep during the teachings. But Matsyendranath, at this time a man swallowed by a great fish and sitting in the belly of it, overheard Shiva's words to Parvati and studied these teachings inside the belly for 12 years. The fish spit out Matsyendranath, fully accomplished yogi, who went on to become the teacher of Goraknath, the legendary founder of the Nath yoga tradition.

In all versions of the story I know, Shiva has awareness of a larger potential audience for the "secret teachings" he offers "live" to Parvati. In one story, he allows Parvati to write down his words. In another, he knows that the sleeping Parvati is not the only listener, that there is a curiously absorbed fish nearby their conversation. In yet another version, he and Parvati are both aware of the fish, and he transforms the fish into the form of a yogi. For the teacher to allow anyone to record in any way, there is a sense that something is being encapsulated, packaged, even perhaps protected (although "authenticity" is a slippery prospect in any circumstance) and tossed out there into the vastness, so that someone capable, at some time, will retrieve it and put it to good use. According to this legend, the Nath tradition as well and its contribution of the disciplinary practices of hatha yoga exist because of re-presentations or commodifications, if you will, made by the great yogi Matsyendranath, who received

for Matsyendranath) comes from Mark Dyczkowski's comments on the the beginning of the *Tantraloka*, in a section Dyczkowski notes to read like an invocation as well as an acknowledgement of the sage Abhinavagupta's teachers and lineage.

²⁸⁵ I retell using multiple versions found on the Internet along with the version received from Dyczkowski and a version of the story offered by Swami Satyananda Saraswati (1981: 288)

the *adiguru*'s teachings intentionally offered to consort and student, Parvati. Even in old stories, one finds indication of Indian sages' (here Shiva as *adiguru*) utilization of available means of transmission as well as their receptivity (like that demonstrated by Matsyendranath) to words of Truth from ages past.

Embracing current age media forms, New Age preachers make their words available to the young and upwardly mobile. An Indian American devotee introduced Gurumaa at an *Amrit Varsha* program in New Jersey in 2010, notifying the audience that Gurumaa's text message service is now available outside of India, a service she notes (as mother to teens), to be a "tremendous resource, especially for the youth." Like Barack Obama whose 2008 Presidential campaign utilized text messages and tweets, New Age gurus like Gurumaa, Ravi Shankar, Jaggi Vasudev and Lama Marut, tap into idealism and reach into the future via new electronic media, hoping their messages may take new life there.

It seems that Internet today is the cheapest and most practical place to toss messages in bottles—to reach the unknown audience. Gurumaa's recent print media effort, *Soul Curry*, not aimed at Gurumaa's own disciples, but rather more toward the spiritual-seeker-consumer, did not last because it did not serve the primary, known, audience of listeners; devotees just didn't buy into it like they did the more devotee-oriented periodical called *Rishi Amrit* and some with whom I spoke seemed off-put by the *Soul Curry* cover photos featuring models who looked like they belonged instead on the cover of *Cosmopolitan*. Alternatively, devotees who do not use or care for Gurumaa's Internet offerings, just ignore them, and those living in the ashram do not need to worry about where to store print media that did not sell.

New Age gurus do “sell” spirituality when they adopt ancient methods and practices, repackage and retail them for spiritual consumers in a new age. These acts can sometimes seem like appropriation, especially when artifacts and religious symbols are socially disembedded from the religious “tradition” through which they emerged.²⁸⁶ On some level, I suppose Gurumaa’s acts of calling herself a Sufi, bringing whirling dervishes from Turkey to Delhi to celebrate Rumi’s 700th birthday on Valentine’s Day (the day itself capitalizing on another social context) and translating Rumi’s songs for a Hindi language audience, are acts of appropriation. I concede that on some level appropriation is a suitable word for actions of one person or body of people adopting symbols and words from another context. But where do we draw our human community lines? Between ages? Between nations? Between religions? All of these lines shift and change and fade and are in many ways dissolving in midst of our information networks. Some Sikhs, however, accuse Gurumaa of “Hinduizing” the Sikh gurus’ words by sharing them with non-Sikhs and relating them, through her own commentary, to Hindu religious ideals most of her listeners can easily relate to.

However, if we call singing Rumi, acknowledging his words (as his), and celebrating his life by telling his stories, an act of appropriation, then we scholars too should be able to see our own study and presentation of others’ religions and religious artifacts (scripture, songs, stories and the like) as a similar form of appropriation.²⁸⁷ Gurumaa finds inspiration in and feels affinity with Rumi, a mystic poet from another age, another geographic context, and another religious tradition. She then teaches

²⁸⁶ I borrow language here from Lawrence A. Babb, who wrote about innovative audio and visual media in the 1990s (1995: 16-17).

²⁸⁷ Coleman Barks, professor of Comparative Literature, has put Rumi’s verse to music and offered it in English language along with American poet Robert Bly, performing for crowds and selling books (not to mention relying heavily on scholars of Persian language to do so).

about Rumi in her discourses, after which books created from those talks are produced and sold, as are audio CDs and DVDs. She encourages her listeners to take up the practice of Zikr with “Hu” then sells CDs to guide them through the new practice. A lot of products come out of an engagement with the Persian/Turkish poet saint. At the same time, in sharing Gurumaa’s voice with the new audiences, I too produce a number of products, and even publish some of them. At the very least, some of Gurumaa’s stories may enter my World Religions and Asian Religions classrooms.

I propose we consider Gurumaa’s acts of intercultural and inter-temporal borrowing at a level beyond the most obvious, the commercial engagement of which they definitively offer evidence. At a deeper level, we can also see how Gurumaa’s borrowing might be valued differently. First, Gurumaa’s media offerings offer listeners “introductions.” In any talk Gurumaa will introduce her listeners to “like-minded” religious friends from other contexts (time or space, or even tradition). Decontextualized words re-presented and recontextualized through Gurumaa’s voice, offer listeners something to which they might not otherwise be introduced. For instance, Hindus may have a great respect for Baba Nanak, but their engagement may be limited. Gurumaa sees herself, I think, as living in an age in which Nanak’s voice should be further introduced. What he said that applies in our own age, she shares and she shares it widely. Second, Gurumaa’s commodities are a supply that meets a demand. Products sold come from devotees’ requests for the offerings. From the perspective of the student, Gurumaa’s commercial engagement, when borrowing or not borrowing, demonstrates her desire to offer them the most effective teaching methods for the current era, and to do so expediently.

We might try to imagine that at least some sages of the past wanted their Truth expressed for unknown audiences, like Shiva who allowed Parvati to write or (at least) knew that there was a big fish listening. Perhaps some ancient poet saints felt that if they cast their nets widely, a prized fish might be caught. Some sages, also scholars, like Abhinavagupta, dated their work demonstrating an awareness of their own acts of tossing out their messages in bottles. Not so unlike spiritual teachers of our age, open to religious symbols and treasures from others' religions, scholars too find themselves involved in the acquisition of riches from the past or from other cultural contexts, and then reframe and repackage these for their own linguistic and cultural contexts and for particular audiences who will understand these treasures through different lens. This is an act performed not just by those scholars teaching in yoga studios and in retreat settings, like Lama Marut, an American born minister's son and academic, now Tibetan Buddhist Lama teaching the *Bhagavad Gita* along with the *Lam Rim*. Those of us who teach and write in academic settings and whose voices aim to reach to scholarly audiences perform it also. Anything that anyone puts "out there" could be received, repackaged, and reworked for any number of possible audiences.

Conclusions

During the Live Chat session in February 2008, Gurumaa identified me as a fast and accurate typist and she chastised her other typists by comparison for their mistakes. Suddenly, I found myself involved with the production, publication and dissemination of a particular guru's Word among her people while at the same time I studied that guru. My already complicated position of participant observer in an ashram – living in

an ashram while studying it – became a tangible reality for me in my role as scribe. (I note that scribes have often been the scholarly types among the devotees.) Soon after Live Chat, I took the *sevā* assignment of “English Typing,” typing transcripts of Gurumaa’s informally recorded English talks. This was a task that any disciple would cherish because it would put him very close to the teachings, very close to the Word of the teacher. For the religious “traditions” in which Gurumaa received her early exposure, it is through Word that the connection, or “the link” between guru and disciple is made. The guru’s Word in the form of *mantra*, *nām* or *shabad* is emphasized in the songs of *sants* and Sikh gurus. Therefore, the disciple seeks to “entangle” herself in the “guru’s word” as Sahajo Bai suggests. Nonetheless, I sometimes found myself resisting the assignment and wishing that I could pull weeds in the garden instead. I had to remind myself that English typing was also the ideal job for a scholar, who herself should be immersed in the word of the guru she is studying (especially when her Hindi language skills are passable but wanting). My *sevā* assignments in Live Chat, English Typing, and helping with sales in the bookstore when Gurumaa Ashram got crowded, were all perhaps “complicated” acts of participant observation, yet each offered rich opportunity for understanding how those near the guru become involved in disseminating her Word and presence and how the net is cast to ever widen the audience. Work in the ashram’s bookstore and visiting devotees in their homes offered insights into demand for the media as well as how new media gets utilized in the spirit of bhakti.

In reflection gleaned from participating in my small roles in Gurumaa’s media production, I see two other important aspects to Gurumaa’s innovative use of media

relevant to the conversation on 21st century *guru-bhakti*. The more complicated of the two, having to do with students' needs and teachers' outputs, indicates something about re-presentation. The second has to do with democratization processes inherent in new media.

First, though new recording technologies make preserving a teacher's word "intact" a possibility, I learned that the presentation of that word is nonetheless strongly influenced by those around the teacher. In addition to what it tells us about the teacher herself, the re-presentation reflects a great deal about the teacher's audience. Examining changes in the years since Gurumaa began to allow recording of her words, I have observed the adoption of newer, glossier media forms as well as the discontinuance of those forms when they were identified as impractical. Here I think not only of the glossy New Age magazine *Soul Curry*, but revised versions of *gurumaa.com* itself as well as the discontinuing and re-continuance of Gurumaa's "no re-run" television show, *Amrit Varsha*.²⁸⁸ We might say the guru's audience, somewhat like the consumer who drives the market, drives the guru's commodifications, at least to certain extent.²⁸⁹

Teachers' offerings to match students' needs reveal something about the guru-disciple "bond of love." The students' questions and concerns that arise from the contexts of their lives draw out the teacher's compassion, and thus the teachings. From

²⁸⁸ Gurumaa took *Amrit Varsha* off the air at a time when Sony TV was charging gurus for the time. It was suspended for a couple of years, during which time her tech team engaged far more heavily with Internet media, and even began to stream her *Amrit Varsha* program (currently, it is streamed weekly on the website). Streamable video, however, did not serve Gurumaa's largest audience, many of whom living in Indian cities do not have regular access to fast enough Internet connections to rely on streaming video. *Amrit Varsha* is now offered on TV again through another Sony satellite network.

²⁸⁹ In 2009, in the *Soul Curry* office, I saw one way that Gurumaa's editors get to know the potential audience, by observing other media targeting similar audiences. There were stacks of new age magazines lying around and I watched one web-designer looking at the website of American New Age recording artist (and *guru-bhakta* himself), Krishna Das.

the stance of the *guru-mārga* tradition, if it were not for the students' seeking, the students' problems and the students' *samsāric* concerns, enlightened sages would prefer to remain in the cave, on the mountain top, or in their own silence. After all, we are told it took Parvati thousands of lifetimes of diligent yogic *sādhana* to draw Shiva's attention away from his yogic state of disinterest in the world. Disciples continually urge their gurus into territories that they themselves inhabit and move through, territories and networks that may be quite different from the ones the guru inhabits herself.

In the history of Gurumaa's own media expansion, I see lots of evidence for student-inspired projects, beginning with her Right Hand Man's desire to record her talks on audiocassette. Sanjay, who was first attracted by Gurumaa's voice on one of these unlabeled recordings, also played an integral role in the early distribution and media choices for his guru's teachings. After identifying the mysterious and compelling voice and establishing a relationship with his teacher, Sanjay called local radio stations over and over again – each time with a different sounding voice – to request that Gurumaa's teachings be broadcast over the radio in Ludhiana. And so the net was cast.

Gurumaa's engagement with the latest media innovations, as well as that of Indian gurus from the recent past, demonstrates a second important point. Somewhat similar to our current age's democratization of *siddhis*, available not only to teachers but also to students less advanced in their yoga, another type of democratization is happening. At this moment in time, in contrast to their forebears who first utilized the printing press, Indian gurus in no way seem to lag behind their peer religious specialists from other parts of the world. Interestingly, teachers espousing alternative spiritualities do not necessarily lag behind teachers from the "isms." In our current age

of information technology, what may have been lopsided just a decade ago seems to be leveling.²⁹⁰ In our age Indian spiritual teachers, even those like Gurumaa without institutional backing, can cast their nets and their own bottled messages in the same media forms utilized by the president of the United States of America. Furthermore, the nature of information in our age (combined with a seekers' own power of discrimination) allows for greater individual access to knowledge from religious and spiritual traditions than ever before. What Babb noted in the context of emerging audio and video media forms in the 1990s as the disembedding of religious symbols has increased exponentially in the age of Internet social media. So too increases the potential Babb notes for new media to aid in the proliferation of new cults and sectarian movements. Spirituality, though profuse and vague the term may be, indeed seems to be well represented in Internet media alongside the "isms," and is an area little explored by scholars.

In serving devotional ends, new media provide the means of transmission of the guru's digital Word and the guru's "electronic presence," and make the power embodied by the guru available to larger unknown audiences for our New Age and perhaps ages beyond. The media also serve as important points of connection between disciples and teachers. In Gurumaa's fold, media serves as connecting point in communities when devotees gather weekly at Video Centers or Meditation Centers for streaming video *pravacan* or to practice meditation together guided by audio CD. It also serves as connecting point for seekers who meet one another in the context of virtual *satsang*. In all of these uses, Gurumaa's engagement with innovative technologies may be

²⁹⁰ Beckerlegge cites a study from 1997, which estimated that of the religious websites maintained by the "world's 5 most influential religions" 80% were Christian (Beckerlegge 2001: 220).

understood to enhance the traditional experience of *guru-bhakti*.

CHAPTER 7 Conclusions

In an ashram darshan session near the end of my second research stint, Gurumaa asked me *So what do you get from all of this research I'm allowing you to do here in this ashram?* I answered, "a degree, the PhD in Religion." She already knew this answer to the question she asked me; I had stated this intention several times. So either she was teaching me something or she was teaching someone else sitting in the small audience of 25 or so people. *And what do I get out of it?* Gurumaa jibed. "What do you need?" I replied with a wisecrack question (somewhat out of character for me), alluding to both her enlightened status and her more than comfortable life style. *Oh, She's very intelligent,* Gurumaa ended this little dual with a note of sarcasm. Shortly thereafter in another darshan session, she again challenged me directly, *What will you get out of this PhD? Will it give you what you really want?* On multiple levels, this is a question worth asking anyone seeking a PhD in the Humanities.

"Conversations" between a would-be-scholar and a contemporary north Indian *sant* frame this study. Inside those questions and their answers we find layers of conversations, stories inside of stories, and also living histories textured by the particularities of settings and contexts.

Each of the three previous chapters, while discussing issues of pluralism, gender and new media, continued the ongoing discussion of *guru-bhakti*. I have aimed throughout to demonstrate the continuity of the tradition of *guru-bhakti* while examining the bhakti within Gurumaa's various innovations: in her pluralism, in her gender activism – the efforts to empower girls and women, and in her embrace of new

media. One reason to see Gurumaa as an “all-in-one guru” is because of her ability to engage in these dialogues and activities from her stance as *bhakta*.

I see Gurumaa as a powerful female spiritual leader outside of the mainstream of any particular religious tradition, yet whose message proves to be relevant to seekers who place themselves within and outside traditions. Without the pedigree of a lineage, she occupies a somewhat precarious position of autonomous authority and lack of routinized institutional framework. It is a position of freedom, yet vulnerable in its lack of outside support. Secure in her ability to earn a living (and teach boldly), in a conversation between the two of us, Gurumaa once compared herself to Kabir and Ravidas, who continued their life’s work – one weaving cloth, another making shoes – even after they became gurus to kings. Though she did not explain further this comparison between herself and the two well-known *sants*, I supposed at the time that Gurumaa implied she could make her living selling her music commercially (something she already does to support the ashram). Perhaps she also implied that the secular education she received would enable her to earn a living in another career field outside of “gurudom,” and thus not have to rely on *dakṣiṇā* from devotees—the “traditional” way singing and speaking gurus find material support. As Gurumaa states regularly, a woman’s material freedom comes from her education, which empowers her so that she does not have to be dependent on any man.

There will always likely be traditionalists, among Hindus and Sikhs alike, as well as Christians, Muslims and others who do not like what Gurumaa stands for or who may feel her bold and personal engagements with honored teachings in their traditions are appropriation. Other detractors are sometimes turned off by the confidence that

Gurumaa exudes, seeing this display as inconsistent from the humble renouncer's role. Many female gurus take the nurturing and ultra-compassionate Mother role, traditionally accepted for women. Gurumaa, however, has taken the bold stance of Master, which includes sometimes taking a higher position and "talking down" to her listeners. This stance may not be the norm for gurus, but it is certainly not unheard of, especially for male gurus. Her disciples see her as Master Mother (*Guru Maa*), capable of being both the loving and compassionate mother teacher as well as the sword-wielding master—delivering tough love through sometimes-harsh means.

As would-be-scholar, I have sometimes found liability in Gurumaa's lack of attention to details such as stating or citing her sources of knowledge (outside of the songs she sings, where she does acknowledge the *sant* who wrote the song—something I much appreciated), especially in published works.²⁹¹ I find myself having a similar critique of contemporary New Age teachers in the US, who sometimes mis-cite their sources or take misinformation about traditions outside of their own cultural contexts without careful study of them.

²⁹¹ Citing all sources in spoken teachings would be a cumbersome pedagogical method for someone targeting "the masses," to be sure. Gurumaa's published books are oral teachings transcribed. There is a prevalent understanding in Indian religious traditions that Truth is not something one can copyright or put a patent on (Bikram of *Bikram Yoga*, being a clear modern day exception to this). Gurumaa does offer her source of Rumi's poetry translated into English from which she made her Hindi translations (Gurumaa c. 2007). Most lack of citations I understood, but a single incident of this lack of attention greatly concerned me for a while in the field—Gurumaa's published product, *Yog Nidra* audio CD. On this CD Gurumaa verbally guides the modern seeker through an ancient Tantric practice, the yoga of sleep (*Yog Nidra*). In her English version of *Yog Nidra*, Gurumaa borrows words directly from another contemporary saint without acknowledging the source, Swami Satyananda Saraswati. Satyananda was a guru in whose ashram she spent some time and with whom she seems to have affinity (her bookstore sold his famous yoga book and for a time, her ashramites engaged in a somewhat formal group study of some of his Hindi exegesis on yogic texts). I never asked Gurumaa about her English *Yog Nidra*'s source or whether or not she had permission to use Satyananda's words. I suppose it is possible permission had been granted. Swami Satyananda's book, *Yoga Nidra* (1976/1998) makes it quite clear that he wanted his students to spread the practice profusely and take his modern version of it as their starting point.

Gurumaa's is a boundary-less vision of the divine and her leadership position like that of many female leaders relies heavily on her charismatic authority, a charisma, which from the perspective of devotees, is manifest in her voice and has the power to attract, awaken, enliven, inspire and transform. That understanding of the power manifest in voice (*vāc*) has existed at least since the time of the *Vedas*. "Voice" or "sound" as revelatory material manifestation of the divine has found expression throughout Indian religious and spiritual traditions (*vāc*, *shabd*, *shabad*, *bānī*), even in the relatively late tradition of Sikhism, the tradition into which Gurumaa was born. Guru Nanak understood himself to be God's mouthpiece (*gurmukh*) and likewise, Gurumaa has indicated from time to time that her speech comes through her, not from "this body." In Florida, a second-generation Indian American teenager shared with me her query to Gurumaa. She asked Gurumaa why she closes her eyes and sits in silence before speaking to a crowd. Gurumaa's answer, she relayed: during these moments with eyes closed, Gurumaa learns (receives) what she will speak.

Many in Gurumaa's audience are attracted by the broad scope of knowledge she displays—a knowledge she gained from her secular as well as her religious training. In other words, her own "book learning," ironically, has a key place in the wisdom she offers. She has mentioned her personal library, though I have not been invited to see it, and she reads English and Hindi language daily newspapers. Her active learning continues. Without it, she might not have discovered Rumi. Her listeners long for the practical knowledge she shares as well as the spiritual treasures. Gurumaa, a keen observer of life around her, addresses pertinent issues in our time, religious pluralism and gender equality, spreading her message by way of a full engagement with the new

media at her disposal. Today's spiritual teachers live in a time when the "masses" out there, their potential audiences, are somewhat more knowledgeable about faith traditions "other" to their own than perhaps they have ever been before. Those seeking knowledge will surely "Google it" and find *something* on the Internet, something spurious or true or something in the large in-between. New Age gurus address audiences in this very profound moment of intercultural exchange and information explosion by looking at our age as one of enormous potential. Rather than characterizing our age as a "clash of civilizations," voices like Gurumaa's focusing on Truth lying within multiple traditions, alternatively suggest that at least some religious leaders see the current moment as the dawn of a new era.

The scholar and the sage both engage in acts of translation and in re-presenting others' voices as well as projecting their own. Their concerns are often quite different, however. The scholar worries about "accuracy," and makes attempts to keep original words and meaning in tact, keeping an eye to academic integrity—citing her sources. The widely broadcast guru's concerns lie most in reaching the Heart of those in her audience, which means speaking in a language, manner and register they will understand without great effort. For the guru, reaching the audience to inspire transformation and spiritual evolution is everything—the only reason to live in the world instead of the cave.

It is through voices like Gurumaa's that the *sant* tradition continues to flourish in north India and is spread across the globe. The gurus of the Radhasoami Satsang in Beas, as shown by Daniel Gold, represent another example of the modern *sant* tradition. I noted to members of Gurumaa's *satsang* in Jalandhar (to their amused delight) that it

seemed like “everyone’s mother” went to the Radhasoami guru in Beas. Gurumaa, though she holds much in common with the syncretistic spiritual lineage in Beas, breathes something totally new into the *sant* tradition that even the Radhasoami gurus (who have also taught Rumi) cannot match—a fresh, fiercely independent, feminine manifestation of Master who is poet, *sant*, and activist. In her song “Sunno Sunno” Gurumaa takes not the *guru-bhakta* voice as she does in other songs translated in this thesis, but rather, she sings in the voice of Shakti herself, as master and as a free bird. Presented in a package attractive to a younger generation of seekers, Gurumaa’s – female – voice is broadcast to empower.

Gurumaa’s interest in educating girls and her bold speech of empowerment are what first attracted this researcher. When Gurumaa challenges my scholarship, she challenges not my secular education. She very straightforwardly places an extremely high value on education for one’s material well being, the first order of business in being human. Making education fully available to girls is the one cause into which she puts her money. She expresses her gratitude to “this body’s mother” for seeing to it that she got her own secular education. It is apparent, then, that she did not chastise my education. Rather, when she asked me what use the PhD would be to me, she may have first struck the nerve of the current sorry job market for Humanities PhD degree holders in the US, but her aim was to strike another nerve, the one holding the tension between knowledge and experience. And it was perhaps also meant to crack a scholarly ego. She challenged not my higher education itself, but the way in which I pursued my “higher” education. What she criticized were the methods I had chosen to study religion. In her mind I had chosen the way of “cramming it up,” a phrase I heard from

her a number of times to describe “book learning.” When we take our knowledge from books, Gurumaa often says, we read about someone else’s experience instead of having our own. It is merely reading someone else’s “expression” of that experience—an experience that cannot be put into words, anyway. Gurumaa says that reading someone else’s experience (even when it is expressed in scripture) is like taking someone else’s “burps” instead of relishing the meal oneself.

Interestingly, Gurumaa fully supported my participant-observation in her ashram, the “experience” side of my academic endeavor, by giving me special allowances to stay longer in her ashram as well as have my children along, and allowing perhaps greater access to her than she has given others seeking to write about her. When accepting these I sometimes contemplated the complicated exchange. Though clearly a novice scholar at the dissertation stage, I might share this guru’s voice with a new unknown if perhaps imaginable audience, while in turn she was helping me to become a teacher in the academy, the purpose for which I was seeking the degree. In supporting my experience and by allowing me access – certainly a bonus for the ethnographer – from the perspective of the *guru-mārga*, she was also offering her presence, and by extension, her *kriṣṇa*. In giving me the English typing *sevā*, she immersed me in her teachings, what her own students understand to be Word. She offered advice on life and health as well as new perspectives and insights on a topic I had been studying for many years.

Gurumaa does not have to build her pedigree upon the words of her spiritual forebears, she insisted to me, but she includes them in her conversations because she feels affinity with them. They also offer her audience a glimpse of the frame of

reference through which she experiences the world and experiences the Self. Her speech at once shows us where she has come from and how expansively she thinks. The masses, she once expressed to me, will not trust her experience alone. In this she is not so unlike the would-be-scholar who must demonstrate her basis of knowledge before offering new insights. Even when the ethnographer's insights come from the experience of bodily participation, she must introduce other voices and theorists to express these. Bringing her conversation partners' voices to the table and utilizing language germane to her audience, Gurumaa introduces to her listeners "new" voices from the past and sometimes from different religious traditions, those whose words she feels have relevance to their contemporary lives. At the same time, Gurumaa gives voice to her own embodied feminine experience when she offers herself as a model of true emancipation (*moksha*) to both women and men.

The conversations between this would-be-scholar and the *sant*, Anandmurti Gurumaa, exist inside and around other conversations about gurus and disciples, about seeking and scholarship and about teaching. While we differ on some points, I have chosen to emphasize throughout this study those with which I feel the most affinity and those with which I felt I could most thoughtfully engage. I find it somewhat ironic that it was the narrowness of my studies that helped me to find Gurumaa, but that from my encounter with her, my studies have broadened. Refusing scholarly categories, she forced this student to look beyond Hindu models of the master-disciple relationship, to examine points of indetermination, and to see across boundaries of Hindu, Sikh and Muslim. In the process, the would-be-scholar must again broaden her knowledge base, something that has proven useful also in the World Religions classroom. From

Gurumaa’s “watching” me, as well as in her reading and response to some of my written work about her, Gurumaa created the possibility for my academic work to take the form of a conversation rather than an outsider’s authoritative exegesis—a conversation in which I am honored to participate. It must be said too, that I respect her for being true to that which she understands herself to be.

The 21st century *guru-bhakti* surrounding this “all-in-one guru” has relevance for other cultural settings besides that of urban India. In each temporal context, spiritual seeking has its particular forms and modes. It will look somewhat different in 21st century America than it does in 21st century India, but these settings will also hold particular traits in common that they may not hold in common with devotional movements from medieval India. In the 15th century in north India, Guru Nanak made such an impact in his community of Muslims and Hindus, that his disciples came to identify themselves not by those common names or “isms,” but rather, by the term “student” (*sikh*). In the generations after Nanak’s departure his life came to be seen as having brought with it a New Dawn in the Age of Darkness. Bhai Gurdas and the Sikhs of generations to follow understood their Guru Nanak to have been the divine agent of change whose love, whose song and whose presence turned the four castes into one. This current moment is also a moment of profound intercultural exchange. Some spiritual teachers of this time, like Gurumaa, see ours as a new age and do see their voices to be “instruments” of change, their lives to bring new light in a time of darkness, and see themselves as taking part in creating a “new world.”

Regardless of how I or other readers understand Gurumaa, I hope this study demonstrates how her disciples see her, as a 21st century mystic and a revolutionary

agent of the divine. She enters global conversations at a time of complex intercultural dialogue on religion and human rights – of which she demonstrates great awareness – and she has chosen to speak in a way that will reach a large audience. Gurumaa-lovers see her as embodying Shakti and therefore as capable of inspiring change not just in individual hearts but also in the world itself, through her bold stance and speech on behalf of girl children in India, the future of the world’s largest democracy. While she honors the past from which she comes, regularly including “our great rishis” in her conversations, she also offers harsh critique of those places in history where she sees “tradition” to have been misused, manipulated and contrived to the suit the special interests of those in power—upper-caste male elites in India (of course she notes, with their corresponding male elites in all corners of the world). Her critique of “religion” as a “male bastion” comes also with a dose of Indian spiritual pride impossible to miss.

Therefore, while Gurumaa sings a new song in a new voice, she also honors tradition in her own way and reminds her listeners that her Truth is the same Truth masters like Nanak, Kabir, Jesus, Buddha all spoke in their particular human contexts. Like the bhakti and *sant* poet-singers in ages before hers, she has taken initiative to broaden the audience of religious knowledge. In one age, vernacular languages democratized religion by sharing previously elite knowledge with less privileged castes. This bhakti *sant*, Anandmurti Gurumaa, presents the “traditions” to the masses via TV and Internet, to audiences sometimes not receiving this religious knowledge from elsewhere. Ironically, this is not because of their lack of privilege, but because their privilege has thrust them into what Gurumaa calls the “rat race” of modern life, a life that has left much of “tradition” (including the good parts) behind. Addressing

audiences through these media may seem new, and it obviously indicates a strong commercial engagement, but it also may demonstrate an element of good common sense from the teacher.

Like Kabir and Ravidas, whose low-caste voices were heard by kings, Gurumaa boldly sings forth from another under-represented caste, the feminine one.²⁹² Ravidas, with his song signatures, reminds listeners of his lowly birth as tanner of hides while at the same time voices authority based on his experience of the divine. Gurumaa engages in a similar act in “Sunō Sunō,” clearly noting her feminine voice – “I am woman,” in her last line – and announcing at the same time her gender’s irrelevance to her enlightened state. Gurumaa, who sees enlightenment as something available to all who seek to experientially realize the ungendered Brahman, spoke these words in a series of *Amrit Varsha* talks in Mumbai: “I do not make any distinction between a male and a female body but given the circumstances in our country, I am extremely grateful to God that I have been given the body of a woman and on top of that, I have been given the capacity to speak” (Gurumaa, *n.d.a*: 58).

With her feminine voice, Gurumaa seeks to wake people up, not only to their innate and universal spiritual yearning, but also to an “imbalanced India,” a nation with a tangible lack of girls – due to female feticide – that without action against the deficit will become crippled in the future. In her words, she attacks first the middle class of her home state of Punjab—a prosperous state with one of the highest discrepancies in its child sex ratio, an indicator of high incidence of the practice of female feticide.

²⁹² Here I borrow language from Joyce Burkhalter Fluekiger’s research subject, “Amma,” an Indian Sufi *pīr* and healer, who compared her female position as a caste, low in the hierarchy of other castes (2009).

Gurumaa's large listening audience demonstrates strong support for the feminine voice in the realm of Indian spiritual expertise and throughout the globe at this point and time in our history. What her body's grandmothers and great grandmothers may have never imagined has transpired in this age, a Punjabi women's enlightened voice has been heard throughout the nation and around the globe. Gurumaa has entered this stream of change in gender equality and human rights at a potent time.

Throughout the research, Gurumaa kept pointing me in the direction of my own experience. There were times when I dove in headfirst and rode the current in which I was immersed. I would however, resurface, dry off, and go home to my householder life of relationship and responsibility (*gr̥hastha dharma*), to my *sādhana* and academic study. Doing this over and over again, in my *āna-jāna*, my movements reflected the experience of the disciple who returns regularly to the ashram hub to "recharge the batteries" and then goes back out (*bahār*) into the world where her *dharma* has her live.

Stories, songs, scriptures, blogs, tweets and living histories are the sacred texts in the universe of 21st century *guru-bhakti*, and they are all part of the conversation as well as the "party" happening around Gurumaa in the Buddhafield-proper and in its outer reaches. Gurumaa's contributions to these sacred texts (some of them new forms) indicate that the master narrative of "guru" is indeed changing, right now, to include feminine narratives of the divine experience. Perhaps then, Gurumaa appears in this powerful moment, not only like the sword-wielding Goddess Durga out to slash egos, but also as one taking part in the demolition of a glass ceiling women have encountered when projecting their voices in the realm of religion. In our age, women's voices including Gurumaa's take their place in official, historical record, and in doing so

demonstrate something about the process of how religious forms, narratives, and understandings (always in flux) take shape.

APPENDIX

Gurumaa's songs translated in this text (in order of appearance)

“Gurudev tumhārī jai hove” (Glory to you Gurudev)

*Taro mein chandra samān ho
Gurudev tumhārī jai hove
Hum sab ke jīvan prān ho
Gurudev tumhārī jai hove*

You are like the moon among the stars
Glory to you, Gurudev!
You are the life force of our existence
Glory to you, Gurudev!

*Muddat se thī talāsh mujhe
Guru mil gaye āp se āp mujhe
Sevā mein lagā lo nāth mujhe
Gurudev tumhārī jai hove*

For a long time I had searched
But the Guru found me by himself
Take me in your service, Lord
Glory to you, Gurudev!

*Ek arz merī manjūr karo
Āb nāth merī ek ter sunno
Mere dil kā andhera dūr karo
Gurudev tumhārī jai hove*

Please honor my one prayer
Now Lord, please hear my one plea
Banish the darkness of my heart
Glory to you, Gurudev!

*Ye dāsī nāth pukār rahī
Charno main shīsh nevaye rahī
De dalo charno kī bhakti mujhe
Gurudev tumhārī jai hove*

This servant, Lord, makes her plea
Placing her head at your feet
Please give me the worship of your feet!
Glory to you, Gurudev!

“Guru kī kripā hai nirālī” (The Guru’s Grace Stands Alone)

*Guru kī kripā hai nirālī, jag mein
Guru kī kripā hai nirālī*

The guru's grace stands alone, in this universe
The guru's grace stands alone.
[This refrain after each couplet]

*Āp tare ho mohe tāre,
Aisa par-upkārī, aisa par-upkārī*

You have crossed, now delivered me
Such a beneficent being, such a benefactor.

*Bāndhe prem kā aisa bandhan, tūte jag ke nāte
Ham tere prem pujārī, ham tere prem pujārī*

Tied in such a bond of love, all other binds to the world break.
We worship this love of yours, we worship this love of yours

*Saṁsār sapnā mohe dikhayā, apna āp mujhko janayā
Dhanya hui main sārī, dhanya hui main sārī*

[You] showed me the world to be a mere dream, revealed your real self to me.
I am fully blessed, I am fully blessed.

*Jagmag jyoti gyān bali hai, parvāno āo shamma jalī hai
Satguru jāo balihārī, satgur jāo balihārī*

The shining light of knowledge is strong, come winged-ones [devotees/moths], the
lamp is lit.

Relinquish yourselves to the true guru, relinquish yourselves to the true guru.

*Main kya karūn guru tujhko arpan, mera tan-man karta hai vandan
Ras se bhīgī main sārī, ras se bhīgī main sārī*

Guru, what shall I offer to you? My body and mind praise you.
I am fully saturated in [your] essence, I am fully saturated in [your] essence.

“Sunno Sunno” (Listen!)

*Sunno Sunno! Sunno Sunno!
Sunno Sunno! Sunno Sunno!
Sunno Sunno merī awāz
Sunno Sunno nayā ye sāz
mujhe pankh mile hain āj
mujhe lenī hai ik parvāz
Sunno Sunno! Sunno Sunno!
Sunno Sunno! He Sunno Sunno!*

Listen! Listen!
Listen! Listen!
Listen to my voice,
Listen to this new instrument.
Today, I have gotten my wings
I have to take flight!
Listen! Listen!
Listen! Hey, Listen!
[This refrain after each couplet]

*Mujh se chale ye jahān
Mujh se hai terī ye shān*

From me the world turns
From me comes your glory.

*Mujh se mile hai bhakti
Main hi hūn terī shakti*

From me devotion is received
I myself am your *shakti* (strength, power).

*Kuch chāh jagī hai man mein
Nayī rāh milī hai man mein*

Some desire has awakened in my mind
I have found a new path in my mind.

*Nayā gulsita banāūn
Nayī duniya main basāūn*

Let me make a new garden
Let me establish a new world.

*Roshan karūn main jag ko
Koi rāh merī na roko*

Let me light up the world
Let no one block my way.

*main hūn shakti main hūn nārī
koi samajhe na becāri*

I am *shakti*. I am woman.
Let no one see me as a pitiable girl.

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VITA

Angela Carol Rudert, a native of Rome, GA, was born in Brussels, Belgium. Until age eighteen she enjoyed dual citizenship status, but never actually traveled outside of the United States until age twenty, when she first traveled to India. It was during this journey that Angela gained a love for Indian culture and a keen interest in Indian religious traditions. Having grown up in the Bible Belt of the United States, early in her life Angela became aware of religious exclusivism in her community, and a common thread in her graduate studies and writing has been her desire to promote a knowledgeable understanding of different religious traditions.

Angela earned a BA in Religion from Davidson College and spent several years teaching Religion and English classes at her high school alma mater, Darlington School. Angela began graduate studies in the History of Religions in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with Professor Joanne Punzo Waghorne, and years later finished the MA degree at Cornell University in the graduate field of Asian Studies with Professor Daniel Gold. Angela's MA thesis, was based on fieldwork in the Bochasawanasi Swaminarayan Temple in Atlanta, GA, and the Pluralism Project at Harvard University funded her research there.

As "the Fates aligned it," Angela continued studies with Professor Waghorne, this time at the PhD level in the Department of Religion at Syracuse University, where she also worked closely with Professor Ann Grodzins Gold. Her research interests at Syracuse have been in South Asian religions, globalization and religion, and gender and religion. Her doctoral dissertation research was supported with fellowships from FLAS and Fulbright-Hays.