Introduction

The figure of the guru has shown itself to be one of the most enigmatic features of the Hindu religious world, originating from the Indian context. Recent literature places them in the context of their multiple roles in South Asian society more generally. The focus is on the domaining effects and the expansibility of the gurus, a discourse that has further been enhanced by their Diaspora presence. Popular modern guru organisations in India own and manage vast institutional and financial empires, command an international presence and, within India, attract followers largely from educated, urban, ‘middle class’ sections of the country’s population.

Social welfare activities belong to a common repertoire of social service engagements undertaken by a wide range of guru-led movements. One could say that such activities are at once emblematic, and a furtherance, of the guru’s multiple societal entanglements. Social service is essentially seen as one core strategy of proliferation and world affirmation across guru-led movements and hence a legitimising trope. There is in effect a ‘guru governmentality’ through this social service, where the state borrows from or harnesses the guru-devotee relationship in order to fulfill certain governmental ends (Copeman and Ikegame 2012). However, at times, guru-led movements’ ideologies of social service often foreshadow and support a more radical, political Hindutva doctrine (Mehta 2008). This is in a doctrinally non-confrontational way, camouflaged by what Zavos (2001) calls sanatana dharma (universal religion), as an unmediated reactionary force. Service is directed towards building a society complying with Hindu nationalism’s agenda of revolutionary nationhood (Basu and Bannerjee 2006). Remembrance of the guru is a catalyst for social action and demonstrates a preference for principles such as human rights, peace and justice.

Drawing from and based on the basic premise that the South Asian guru is multifaceted, uncontainable, a domain crosser par excellence and a total social phenomenon (Jenkins 2010), I discuss through a few illustrations and a general meta analysis drawing from field insights, how these guru-led movements interplay social action and service and thereby build their legitimacy in society. Towards deploying social service as a legitimising trope, guru-led movements cultivate it through the following architectures: unique visions on society, ideas on social ethics, on social action and on social service and work. Further, how this guru faith manifests in practice,
through tangible social services and an interplay of memory and oblivion, thereby evolving their unique style, is the crux of this chapter.

The architecture of guru-led movements’ social service: visions on society, social ethics, social action and service

Visions on society

Guru-led movements’ visions of society stem from the doctrine of ‘belonging’: that the real practical world belongs to the Absolute and the ethereal. They innovatively reconfigure the social space, discursively shaping community notions coalesced around sets of faith-oriented lenses and resonating differentially in a complex network of ‘public spheres’. For instance, for the Ramakrishna Mission, one of the oldest guru-led movements, society is generally viewed as a macrocosm, a larger existential and tangible yet ephemeral reality on which the divine play or *lilaprasangas* are undertaken (Dhar 2006). Human beings are actors and the larger administration rests with the higher power. In the binary scheme of things, society comprises the material world ‘out there’ vis-à-vis the spiritual world within. For a more contemporary guru-led movement such as the Art of Living Foundation, started by the charismatic teacher Sri Ravi Shankar in Bengaluru, India in 1982, society is viewed as the basic existential domain, a composite of beings that are supposed to be in quest of the Absolute. Society in the Art of Living terms is effectively ‘matter’, the reality that is attainable, knowable and should eventually be on the path of transcendence (Sri Sri Publications Trust 2007).

On social ethics

Guru-led movements have peculiar views on deontological and teleological ethics. The deontological dimensions of guru-led movements’ ethics are moral religious sentiments, containing notions of divine nature and their attributes. The teleological dimensions of guru-led movements’ ethics are perceptions, i.e. ways of taking/understanding the world and differential theological sentiments as expressions of reflective/reflexive acts on the part of the faith commune.

For instance, the Brahmakumaris World Spiritual University, a millenarian Hindu sect, proposes a set of ‘deontological’ codes including strict adherence to the Raja Yoga (a Hindu philosophy of consecration) regime. There is a stoic belief in the ‘world tree’ theory, which proposes the Brahmakumari souls alone are the embodiment of ‘truth’ and ‘light’ and hence located on the highest branch. Therefore, there is a calculated ‘othering’ of non-Brahmakumari souls or beings, an erasure of their very existence, mentally first, and then believed to be physically inevitable in the apocalypse (which is also considered inevitable).

The teleological forms of Brahmakumaris’ ethics are seen in their ‘assimilative and world affirming’ paradigm, wherein Brahmakumaris’s repertoire is instrumental, both at the level of epistemology as well as praxis. The epistemological instrumentalism emerges from its shift in focus and teachings from pure metaphysical soul discourses to the ethnography of everyday living. Apart from the regular course and advanced meditation course for the spiritually enlightened and ready to receive, Brahmakumaris also conduct tailor-made courses on areas of ‘material success’ and ‘worldly relationships’, all garnished with the Raja Yoga apotheosis. The praxis instrumentalism then emerges in the shaping of the metaphysical Raja Yoga to a tailored form, non-Brahmakumari souls not being apocryphal but perceived by Brahmakumari souls as in need of an anchor, which they supposedly provide (Walliss 2007).

For another guru-led movement, Chinmaya Mission, social ethics entail the Chinmaya
Mission version of Hindu ethnocentrism, operating wherefrom is the tripartite social connectivity of ‘love, harmony and service’ (Tejomayananda 2001). The social and teleological ethics are attributed to the ‘action’ component of Vedanta, to which are attached twin aspects: 1) a dynamic vision of life and worldview, which is totalitarian, and 2) this-worldly-spirituality through work sans attachment to fruits of labour (Central Chinmaya Mission Trust 1989), a spiritual alienation of sorts that would accumulate transcendental benefits for the individual, and hence through synergy, for society at large. Therefore, in certain ways a Hindu utilitarian ethical vision prevails: Hindu ideals of oneness, equity, harmony, service and spiritual attitude in work (Chinmayananda 1980; Emir 1994), ensuring the greatest good for the greatest number.

Thus, in terms of social ethics, guru-led movements can be said to address ‘framework questions’ as well as to some extent ‘application questions’ (Dalmiya 2009). They essentially examine social ethics or ethical subjectivity not from the point of the moral agents, but from the point of view of the objects/persons that are recipients of the ethical concerns of guru-led movements, thereby forwarding two dimensions: moral considerability (which is the framework question demanding a criterion of having standing in the ethical domain), and moral weight (or the application question of adjudication or judgement as to who should obtain the benefits most).

Guru-led movements’ stance on social ethics proposes that all ‘beings’ as part of the Infinite are worthy of moral consideration. This is an ethically expansive move, as it invites all socially ostracised groups squarely back to the moral table. On the application question, the guru-led movements’ stance is that of universal care, but not devoid of the politics of power and privileges, which willy-nilly enter the discourse. Basically, what comes to the forefront with respect to guru-led movements’ social ethics is the duty of ‘beneficence’: notions of moral/social duty and a generalised ethical subjectivity.

On social action

Guru-led movements’ stance on social action emerges from a distinctively indigenous cosmovision and cosmology. The quest for social justice is effectively a de-colonial effort in which the mantle of Hindu-derived spirituality is utilised by the guru-led movements to dethrone colonial hegemonies. The mandate operates within a field determined by colonial and post-colonial formations of meaning: guru-led movements signify a cultural production of sorts, in which the sphere of the socio-religious is re-articulated.

For instance, Ramakrishna Mission posits itself as a crucial religio-spiritual actor responsible for emancipation. Action here essentially transcends self – the motto and aphorism of ‘selfless action’ prevail. According to Bhajananda (2006) and Smarananda (2006), there are four broad types of action, or what is called in Indic literature, *karma yoga*, existing in the Ramakrishna Mission: *nishkama karma* or work without motive; *bhagawatpriti karma* or work done with the desire of pleasing the Lord; *prapatti* or total self-surrender to the Lord; and *work as participation in divine lila*.

Action for Vivekananda Kendra (a service-based, Vivekananda ideology-driven mission and spiritual organisation) is emancipation, for which the antidote is spiritualism. Further, this action, according to Vivekananda Kendra’s ideals, is associated with attributes of dispassion, detachment, oneness of the other and service (Parameswaran 2004) as the modus operandi. The Mata Amritanandamayi Mission (started by devotees of the hugging saint Mata Amritanandamayi or Amma) stance towards action is universalistic, involving tackling multiple systems geared towards the clientele, in a spiritual way, with Amma’s teachings as showing the right way.

The Art of Living-defined social action has the following qualifications: spiritualised, dialogic, devotional and dispassionate. The concept given for action is *ishwarapranidhana*; i.e.
recognition of the divine in all, and hence all beings as worthy of devotion. Tapa (penance), swadhyaya (self-study undertaken for pure knowledge) and ishwarapranidhana (seeing the divine in all) are all called kriya yoga or the yoga of action (Sri Sri Publications Trust 2007).

**On social service and work**

On service and social work, Sri Ramakrishna emphasised the importance of selfless action: Ramakrishna’s gospel of service is based on the spirit of practical Vedanta. The summum bonum here is to work simultaneously for one’s own liberation and for the good of the world (Adiswarananda 2006). Three forms of understanding service and social work emerge – the ‘normative’, through the dictum ‘sivajnanejivaseva’ (i.e. serving beings as manifestations of Godhead); the ‘ideational’, through the adage ‘atmanomoksanthanamjagathitaya ca’ (meaning for one’s own liberation and good of the world); and the ‘epistemological’, where there is a theistic notion of service a theistic existential appropriation of social work is undertaken. Theistic existential appropriation basically implies the given-ness of this worldly existence; sufferings as a natural outcome of existence; the imperative of transcendence; the existence and proof of God and Divine being posited later as the Divine Mother; and Ramakrishna Mission’s endeavours as playing a critical role in alleviating this-worldliness to divinity, by accepting divinity of beings. The modus operandi of those endeavours, i.e. the way social service is carried out, is the theistic existential appropriation of service.

Guru-led movements’ stances on service and work also reinforce the link between community development and spirituality. Spiritual teachings of guru-led movements are generally placed at the top of the hierarchy of service (to body, mind and soul) (Beckerlegge 2007), with variations on political engagement policies. Further, one peculiarity of the guru-led movements’ stance on service/work is that the general delivery of seva or service is dependent more on the interior disposition of the performer and less on the inner transformation of the recipient. Service position is more as a ‘religious sadhana’, a means to spiritual realisation, which resembles historical religious forms of charitable action rather than featuring objective service. In some way, the derivation and appeal to traditional Hindu stances to support the service rhetoric also makes the guru-led movements prisoners of the past history, historiography and hagiography determining what service should be and how it is defined.

The core of service/work proclaims more of ultimate goals, i.e. transformation, recognition of divinity in beings, supramental manifestation, and less of proximate goals such as inequality and poverty alleviation. However, it is more a matter of degree, the focus not being exclusively on consciousness raising. In contrast to the secular service sector where philosophies draw from different sources and epistemologies, in the guru-led movement contexts, the philosophy of service/action/work is derived solely from its core faith-oriented ideational stances. The service/work positions of guru-led movements eventually resemble an ‘experiential realism’, where although secular and faith-based approaches deal with the same reality, faith inserts the divine mandate in the service. It challenges the secular to acknowledge the transcendent frame of reference and moral accountability. The secularist insight and presence, on the other hand, challenges the faith orientation to reconceptualise general assumptions on God, creation and eschatology, so as to integrate secularist ingredients in service.

**Faith in practice: the tangibility of social service**

Faith manifests in practice in guru-led movements through tangible social service. The genesis of social service for the guru-led movements has been initially serendipitous and later systema-
tised, or apriori streamlined for translation of charisma and faith. The initiation and streamlining of social services in guru-led movements has been through a coalition of charisma power and devotees’ and followers’ interest in perpetuation. Nevertheless, a need to create a world of shared meanings and practices has also been recognised, resulting in a paradigm shift in guru-led social services from the traditional ‘privatised’ role of faith, with a focus on the spiritual–sacred, towards the ‘public’ role, which embodies multidimensional social capital.

The idea/mandate is to bring faith to the public realm in a visible way, beyond rituals, towards a community orientation. This mandate also entails a kind of ‘re-authoring’, the guru-led movements being the navigator of the process; the reconfiguration is derived from guru-led movements’ faith and spiritual knowledge. Ideologically, faith is essentially seen as providing a moral base on which to re-build a deterritorialised global culture, transcending economics and essentially dealing with the essence of humanity and what is right. The portrayed governing idea of guru-led movements is to serve the cause of social integration by re-creating bonds of solidarity in an imagined commune. The question nevertheless remains in terms of whose commune and what nature of integration. The service ideology of guru-led movements is not of the nature of armchair prophecy, but mediated actively by religious and civil practices – philanthropic giving, collective prayer and rituals. Habitual practices of seva, sadhana and yoga within the guru-led movement context, rather than simple espousal of beliefs, have been responsible for the service repertoire. Within this practice-driven ideational account, there is a relationship between faith, affiliations to guru-led movements and philanthropic engagements of concerned stakeholders. Faith discerns certain meaning systems of self–other exchange within which the tradition of service and also norms of community organising around the faith principle are created.

The scope encompasses the core social sectors of development such as education, health and livelihood as well as certain customised programmes. The mission is inevitably ‘social’, through the prism of faith. The mandate is ‘service’ through which to eventually realise twin transcendent ideals of spiritual–material upliftment and proliferate the ‘message’. Both of these are derivatives of the mission – the guru-led movements’ mission-ideals then seep into the social canvass through the projects either in an apriori, parallel and/or retrospective manner. The management of these institutionalised efforts have a ‘missionary consciousness’; there is an order ministration of evangelical nature.

Social services and guru-led movements

The engagement of guru-led movements in core sectors of development such as education, health and livelihoods describe the scope of guru-led social services at one level. At another it also projects the guru-led movements’ assertion/partnership in development goals in a resource limited setting, by simultaneously factoring in culture. The mission is to respond to a religious calling, and cultivate a faith-informed vision of care using faith resources. All the guru-led movements use some form of religious imagery in their mission statements to communicate their faith-basedness in the ‘public face’. In fact, for guru-led movements, the service as a part of the mission is also considered as a practice of faith, not too distinct from other expressions of faith. Discourse is an important tool by which guru-led movements’ missions are highlighted, through which the guru-led movements’ stance is projected comprising of social practices and enabling the construction of meanings and identities. Mission statements of guru-led movements, with their ‘social’ and ‘faith’ amalgam, are culturally patterned for determining relevance for their public. In realising the service mandate through the social initiatives, guru-led movements establish a middle ground between the secular and sacred – focusing on the faith community efforts in influencing/effecting change.
In terms of practicalities in the management of social services, guru-led movements’ ‘public face’ is characterised by religious phraseology in their mission statements and religious symbolism in their logos. Headed by the charismatic guru, the members of the order are in charge and the adherent base forms a volitional second line supported by paid staff with a fair degree of formalisation in recruitment. ‘Faith’ nevertheless remains the overarching raison d’etre for engagement at all levels. Finance generation is through modes of exchange beyond market logics, ‘philanthropy’ being one core source. In terms of social service goods delivered, guru-led movements provide flexible services involving relational programmes, with faith-oriented services also being a part of the package. The organisational culture is imbued with ‘faith’ as the overarching and underlying tenet. There is a certain kind of reliance on secular expertise, but not sans the spiritual veto power in information processing and decision-making. Hence, the secular/profane is not discounted in managerial aspects; faith is an important and un-negotiable add-on.

In the management of guru-led movements’ projects there is an engagement of leadership, use of structures and resources and practical amendments in guru-led movements’ functional policies to aid intervention. There is an inbuilt understanding in the management of the importance of providing a faith-based context for service. The guru-led movements’ financial status and the orientation of the monastic order also influence the policy and management issues of social projects. Management entails an involved mediation process, with media, environments and networks through which symbols and expressions of faith are circulated and coalitions/partnerships built. Certain programmatic and systemic effects result from the infusion of guru-led movement players having consequences for the profile of services and who gets served. This, in effect, influences the transferability of guru-led movement interventions across religious and secular applications in order to satisfy constitutional issues of equity and public choice.

Further, the affirmative relationship of the guru-led movements with the legal system is an exercise in practiced legitimacy, a way to consolidate their stand as reasonable social actors. Guru-led movements’ amicability with political and local governance is also a result of the state policy to view the guru-led movements as ‘communities of character’ (see Kennedy and Bielefeld 2006) that can generate social capital, which in turn contributes to social change and development. Sometimes, this falls in the realm of post-Enlightenment ethics discourse that dominates contemporary public policy discussions; guru-led movements are becoming crucial actors in local/translocal politics. Essentially, they have demonstrated potential in service outreach, partnering or assisting the state welfare agenda and rights mandate. The guru-led movements’ relationship with state also signifies a policy shift from government to governance, emphasis put on the way in which discourses and traditions shape service delivery while simultaneously drawing attention to beliefs and worldviews that shape public choice (see Biebricher 2011; Ikegame 2012). The amicability is most defined in state policies of externalisation, wherein guru-led movements have managed to circumvent state imposed restrictions through the faith rhetoric and emerge as dominant transnational actors.

While complying with state mechanisms, the signature teachings of the gurus actually become the principal rhetoric supporting service. Not satisfied with simply delivering the goods, they also add the faith and morality ingredients into the basket. Even though state compliance may be a political act, for guru-led movements it is an act of applying faith to ‘this world’ and connecting to the roots.

Within the economic system there are relationships beyond market exchange as guru-led movements essentially deal with religious goods that are acquired or received through charisma and/or transcendental forces. Charisma and/or transcendental forces provide charismatic gifts in the form of meditation or spiritual and life skills techniques, which have become signature goods.
of guru-led movements. Even though these goods involve certain rational actions in terms of demand and supply, the market model does not adequately describe the tactics resulting in guru-led movements relying on philanthropy as the main source of funding.

With the follower groups in civil society, guru-led movements tap into intrinsic–extrinsic religiosity–spirituality and tamper with the religio-spiritual orientations to then affect notions of self and cognitions of associates. Their beneficiaries are viewed as an imagined community of would-be followers, with guru-led movements’ utilising their faith capital along with social service to reach out. They also extend, using Wilson’s (2011) term, an ethics of hospitality towards potential service seekers, especially in situations where alternatives are limited. That way a combination of bonding–bridging social capital is generated.

The dynamics of guru-led movements’ social service: memory, oblivion and style

Memory is the political economy of faith assertions: gurus’ charisma and his/her organisational memory transferring onto public memory creation and recreating ideational stances. Oblivion is the non-transference of organisational memory to public memory. The service style is characterised by the antagonisms and contradictions derived through the correspondence between memory and oblivion.

Guru-led movements’ memory is, thus, like a spiritual rationality wherein there is a shared inherent purpose to experience connectedness with the transcendental vision demonstrated by guru-led movements. The rationality element validates this worldly action – shared higher-level purposes being connectedness with the Absolute and others. Essentially, social conditions influence how memory acquires meaning through faith and related practices. Faith informs social practices of guru-led movements and remembrance of the charismatic guru lineage is a catalyst for social action. This memory then demonstrates a preference for principles of human rights, peace, solidarity and ‘signs of the times’ are considered as the basis for social analysis. Memory also very strongly shapes social imaginations – placing on the charismatic guru and teachings a kind of doctrinal responsibility to feed into the pragmatics and contextualities of social justice. Guru-led movements’ memory is culturally loaded; they ensure a cultural continuity by preserving the ‘knowledge’ through mnemonics (practical Vedanta, Raja Yoga, Integral Yoga, Sudarshan Kriyatechniques being illustrations), rendering it possible for followers to reconstruct their cultural identities. Mnemonics interplay with social action through image creation of the charismatic guru as a ‘socially aligned’ figure, ceremonial practices that combine ritual prayer with service, narrative building of the embeddedness of service in the guru-led movement historiography and genealogy and inscriptions in its publics.

For guru-led movements the oblivion dynamics arise in the course of the movements’ reflexive acts in re-defining and refining their own positions in relation to the larger socio-political environ. Oblivion has been further enhanced by neo-liberalisation, which has opened spaces for guru-led movements to enter into the public realm in newer ways and probably also to enter into mainstream ‘secular’ partnerships.

Guru-led movements’ styles of service/action go beyond simple instilling/extolling of virtues, but rather portray themselves as vanguards of fulfilling social obligations. The operational ontology of guru-led movements contains communitarian notions of social citizenship. Essentially the immanence of the soul is emphasised. Other aspects are that of integrity of the human experience, commune as predominant and social justice notions as fertilising/impregnating aspects of charity/philanthropy. There is a stylised form of faith-based social logic, and the ‘public good’ factor in the guru-led movements ideals is the utopia towards which sociality is geared.
Faith and a collateral seepage of Hindu hegemony through service is the general political economy for the guru-led movements. This is manifested through service religiosity, staff religiosity and in general organisational faith. There is an institutional coupling of service with the resources, authorities and culture of guru-led movement ideas. Two analytical frames, drawing from Bradley (2009), define the political economy dynamics – one is the way faith shapes their perceptions of the world and their actions in development; and the other is the way this translates into practice.

Guru-led movements are particularly inclined towards engaging in services that promote wellbeing and are in line with their faith-based outlook. Contrary to being unblemished ‘armies of compassion’ (Kennedy and Beilefield 2006), guru-led movements have their intention of initiation/co-option spelt out in their mandate. This initiation/co-option is either a direct derivative of faith and/or truncated from the teachings-praxis calculus of the guru-led movements – the latter being more prominent. Faith-based services enumerate vulnerable populations and circumscribe their continued survival within bounded spatial realities. This process of ‘emplacing’, using Arif’s (2008) concept, suggests a faith-coded bio-politics of the guru-led movements, i.e. a practice of governmentality that puts agents other than state, and thus the guru-led movements themselves, in a position of exerting power over continued social life.

Conclusion

The large-scale discharge/dissemination and conduct of social services is a driving force behind the guru-led movements’ object-centred sociality. Here the object is the society and the cultures and subcultures that are not their own. The final purpose of this is the notion of integration. The fact that this normative consensus and the shared values and traditions that the movements’ seek through this move of sociality is not possible in this growing and diverse cultural and ethnic consciousness, makes adequate room for the arguments of hegemony and domination that are a part and parcel of the guru-led movements’ sociality.

Nevertheless, what guru-led movements manage on the social playground is a socio-culturally engineered consensus. Due to their resource endowments and partnering in the development goals in an essentially resource-limited setting, the metaphor of ‘in thought collective’ (with civil society, state and market) may be applicable. This kind of integration then gives the guru-led movements adequate grounding to be critical and powerful civil society actors in India and the Diaspora.

References


