



Lise McKean

Divine
ENTERPRISE

GURUS AND THE
HINDU NATIONALIST
MOVEMENT



Enterprise

HINDU NATIONALIST MOVEMENT

Lise McKean

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The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637
The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London
© 1996 by The University of Chicago
All rights reserved. Published 1996
Printed in the United States of America
05 04 03 02 01 00 99 98 97 96 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN (cloth): 0-226-56009-0
ISBN (paper): 0-226-56010-4

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

McKean, Lise.

Divine enterprise : Gurus and the Hindu Nationalist Movement /
Lise McKean.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-226-56009-0. — ISBN 0-226-56010-4 (pbk.)

1. Hinduism and politics—India. 2. Nationalism—Religious aspects—
Hinduism. 3. Gurus—India. 4. Hinduism—Social aspects—India.

I. Title.

BL1215.P65M35 1996

95-24600

294.5'177'0954—dc20

CIP

Ⓢ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the
American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper
for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

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THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS
CHICAGO & LONDON

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*For Harry, Lee, and Michael—
a triumvirate of teachers, friends*

King: Call back the beaters. And tell the soldiers to go easy here; this is an ashram and I'd like to see it respected. Besides, the hermits are quite unpredictable: quiet on the surface, but very tense inside. Worrying them is asking for trouble.

Shakuntala

by Kalidasa



PREFACE

Many years have passed since first I traveled to India, arriving in Delhi with the itinerary of a wanderer. I had recently completed a B.A. and was ready to learn about the reality underlying the macro-theories and statistics on India's political economy, which were part of my college education. With curiosity whetted by a year's roaming in India, I began an M.A. in South Asian studies at the University of Hawaii, started learning Hindi, and took courses in Indian history, religion, and art. A scholarship from the American Institute of Indian Studies to study Hindi in New Delhi brought me back to New Delhi in 1982.

Like other students on the Hindi program that year, I was dismayed to find that our Indian teachers were as indifferent about teaching us Hindi as they were assiduous about acculturating us to the regimes of New Delhi's literati and bourgeoisie. Indeed, the city's garden of bourgeois delights that I was to find blossoming five years later and in full flower by 1992 was already burgeoning in 1982. Indira Gandhi's government undertook a massive construction program—road improvements, stadiums, five-star hotels—to equip the capital with amenities deemed necessary for hosting the Asian Games and the Non-Aligned Movement Conference. From the roof of my apartment in one direction I could see the domes of emperor Humayun's tomb and in the other the towering lightposts of the newly built Nehru stadium. On daily walks to Hindi class, I passed families of construction workers living alongside the roads and under the flyovers they were building. On the same roads contingents of municipal workers were whitewashing curbs, planting shrubs, and removing dust and debris from one place to another to make the thoroughfares appear attractive and tidy.

Plans for research projects take unexpected turns. While studying Hindi in Delhi, a photo of a woman guru in a neighborhood tea shop prompted me to consider collecting material on her for the M.A. research

paper I would have to write on return to Hawaii. After a few trips to her ashram in Agra and always finding her away on tour, I turned my attention to Phoolan Devi, the woman bandit who had become a media sensation. Later I developed the materials I had collected on her into an M.A. paper, "Beauty and the Bandit: Ambiguity and Myth in Indian Journalism."

Two years later when sitting at my desk on a rainy winter day in Sydney and thinking about a field site in north India, memories came to mind of cooling swims in the Ganges at Rishikesh, where mica-flecked waters sparkle in the hot sun. I also recalled the riverside ashrams and temples with their garish statues of gods and mechanical dioramas of scenes from Hindu myths. During an escape from Hindi school in Delhi to the Himalayan foothills of Rishikesh, I had briefly passed through Hardwar. My only memory of it was riding to the Hardwar bus stand in a crowded taxi with a boisterous group of transvestites on pilgrimage.

Another tenacious memory from the Rishikesh trip was the sight of leprous beggars lining the path to the footbridge over the Ganges. Knowing that exchange was an important anthropological theme, and finding that there was little in the literature on beggars in pilgrimage centers, I planned to study this topic and settled on Hardwar as a place to base myself. In March 1987 I returned to Delhi and began to make academic and other social contacts—largely among upper-caste Hindus. Their distaste for my proposed study of beggars was tempered by a prevailing enthusiasm for my selection of Hardwar as a site for fieldwork. A few complained about its greedy brahman priests, but generally Hardwar was highly esteemed and revered as a place where beauty is sanctified by Ganga Ma. Common also were warnings about perils facing visitors to Hardwar: unscrupulous and dangerous persons frequent sacred places, persons with powers they use for malefic purposes.

After surveying Hardwar I decided to focus my research on ashrams, for they seemed to occupy an intriguing and prominent position in the local hierarchy of institutions. Soon after arriving in Hardwar I met Bharati Ma, a woman guru who offered me a room in her ashram. The graciousness of Bharati Ma, her disciples, and devotees made the ashram a home during my stay in Hardwar. I traveled with Bharati Ma on several occasions: to Badrinath with her devotees on pilgrimage from Calcutta; to Gomukh, the spectacular ice cave beyond Gangotri in the high Himalayas, where she initiated three disciples as ascetics; and to Calcutta, her native place where she ministered to the devotees whom she had left behind when she moved to Hardwar twelve years previously.

During the fourteen months that I was based in Hardwar, fieldwork rounds had the regular rhythms and unexpected spectacles of daily life in a pilgrimage town. After preliminary visits to scores of ashrams, I became a frequent visitor at about a dozen, where I became familiar with the presid-

ing guru and residents, local votaries, and habitues. Visits included attendance at rituals and special celebrations as well as informal conversations with whomever would talk with me. Attempts to steer conversations towards sociological or economic questions I had concerning the institution were countered by my interlocutors' vague if not dismissive replies. They insistently directed dialogues towards religious and philosophical topics. Quickly I learned that direct questioning was not effective for procuring information concerning an ashram's cash flow. Conversations with a local lawyer and an accountant proved far more helpful for obtaining a general idea of ashrams' legal and financial affairs.

Delhi provided another site for fieldwork. From Hardwar I made periodic trips there for research on branches of organizations I was studying and to meet with colleagues and friends as a reprieve from the restrictions of ashram life. While in Delhi my rounds were varied: ashram visits, academic seminars, library research, parties, and weddings of friends. Formally and informally I met with people and learned about their work in government bureaucracies and transnational corporations, journalism and law, publishing and cinema, the tourist trade, arts and crafts emporia, small businesses and nongovernmental development agencies. During these visits I grew more familiar with the habitus of Delhi's upper and upper-middle classes, groups whose values and practices I was learning about not only through research on Hindu religious organizations—indeed, many contacts in Delhi or their relatives had ties with some ashram or another—but also through the newspapers and magazines which I was regularly reading. Besides field notes and a hefty collection of religious literature published by ashrams, fieldwork materials also included an extensive clippings file on topics such as gurus and ashrams, political rituals and scandals, dowry deaths and sati, terrorist massacres, communal riots, and the activities of militant Hindu nationalist organizations.

The end of fieldwork in Hardwar coincided with the opening of a new Kali temple at Bharati Ma's ashram. Limited funds frequently brought the project to a standstill, but after a decade of incremental construction, at last the temple was sufficiently completed to consecrate the deity for public worship.

Often during fieldwork I thought things should be worse. The angst of being a novice fieldworker was abated by the many pleasures I found amongst the company I kept in Hardwar and Delhi and from the constant stimulation that accompanies living in the world's second most populous country. When I returned to Australia, I found myself in conditions unfavorable for the project of writing about my field research. The physical and social environment of the isolated, outback town of Derby—flanked by tidal mudflats and glaring desert—offered few pleasures and rendered surreal attempts to occupy myself with intellectual work on Hindu ashrams.

Scorched by a year in the outback, when I returned to Sydney I understood better the dynamics which can prompt people to retreat to an ashram. The library became my retreat. I had formulated many questions concerning Hindu religious organizations in relation to the politics of nationalism and eagerly began to look for clues and answers. The scale of the project daunted me: it had shifted from the seemingly manageable proportions suggested by an ethnography of Hardwar's ashrams to the unwieldy dimensions of the Indian nation-state and the ideologies and activities of nationalists.

When at last I extricated myself from the scholarly archive, I became immersed in the clippings file and spent several months weaving them into thematic essays. These essays concerned the discourse of secularism; the use of Hindu religious imagery in advertising; travel writing on pilgrimage centers; the cults of Mahatma Gandhi and the Nehru family (before Rajiv Gandhi's assassination); public appearances and pronouncements by politicians at events staged by religious organizations. These essays, along with related essays on the ideological content of the concept of sanskritization, on the production of national culture by the Indian state, and on the career and legends of Radhakrishnan—as well as fieldwork and its antecedents in India and elsewhere—underpin the following treatment of the politics of spirituality.

Of the many leads that convinced me of the need to study the involvement of gurus and their organizations in the Hindu nationalist movement, the most powerful impetus was an encounter with Ashok Singhal, the general secretary of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), during which I witnessed the ferocious determination of Hindu nationalist leadership. This visit to the New Delhi headquarters of the VHP was prompted not only by the attention it was receiving from the media, but also by its own paid-for publicity. For example, the VHP placed a large newspaper advertisement that begins with the headline "Are Hindus Communal?" and summarizes the VHP's arguments concerning the government's failure to solve the communal problem (*Times of India*, February 13, 1988). It blames this failure on opportunistic politicians and Muslim leaders who "go on misguiding their followers into believing that Hindu bodies are communal and enemies of Muslims." It describes Hinduism as *manavdharma* (the religion of mankind); Hinduism is "a parliament of religions and the very antithesis of violence, terrorism and religious intolerance." Reasoning from these tenets, the VHP asserts:

Thus it can be safely asserted that an enemy of Hinduism is the enemy of human race. To label such a noble Hindu society as communal is the greatest lie in the world. It is a great conspiracy to destroy a noble society for petty gains. Search for Hindu identity and its rejuvenating roots should not be mis-

taken for communalism. . . . All leaders of the world work for the welfare of their own community.

The VHP advises its “Muslim brothers” that if “they want to remove their chronic poverty” they must learn to “live peacefully and fearlessly with Hindus.” It closes the advertisement by asking readers to spread the message “to create awakening.” The advertisement’s last paragraph equates the work of the VHP with national integrity, economic development, and social welfare. To create a sense of urgency and arouse support for the organization, it closes with portents of disaster, a disaster that only the VHP can prevent:

The birth of the Vishva Hindu Parishad is for the unity and integrity of the country and the moral regeneration of Hindu society, its survival with self respect and uplift of Harijans [untouchables], Girijans [tribals] and other weaker sections. But it cannot continue its work without financial help from each of you. Hope you will not fail us. Only this can save you from disaster.

When I visited the VHP headquarters in February 1988, I was told of my good fortune: Ashok Singhal was present and might agree to see me. After waiting for about an hour I was brought upstairs to Singhal’s office. When I told him about my research on ashrams in Hardwar and Rishikesh, he said to me, “Of all nations, India alone has spirituality.” Singhal made his declaration in Hindi. Although he used the seemingly English term spirituality, his usage of it was embedded in the ideology of Hindu nationalism with its tenets of the moral and political authority of those who claim to embody and uphold spiritual values.

Singhal’s office was adorned with icons of Hindu nationalism: a picture showing an outline of India with Durga inside; a picture of the Rani of Jhansi; a statue of Krishna and Arjuna in their war chariot; a photograph of Jayendra Saraswati, the Shankaracharya of Kanchi; and several images of the sacred syllable *aum*. During most of the time I sat in his office, Singhal directed his attention to his associates. They discussed the VHP’s strategies to mobilize mass support and government acquiescence in their drive to take over the Babri mosque and build a Hindu temple on the site in Ayodhya that they claim is Rama’s birthplace. The impassioned and violent tone of their discussion about Ayodhya as well as Singhal’s hostility to me was unlike the behavior of those speaking about spirituality that I was accustomed to in ashrams. Although I had read numerous newspaper and magazine articles, including interviews with Singhal which explained why Hindus are angry, to witness such belligerence and hatred alerted me to the grave implications of these VHP leaders’ determination to fight for political power.

In this study spirituality is conceptualized as a complex of ideas and

practices that uses referents to ultimate values to legitimate the authority and self-interested actions of specific political groups and coalitions of groups. The use of anger and hatred to generate particular political identities and mobilize people to fight enemies, evident in the life and work of V. D. Savarkar and witnessed in Singhal, is the other face of spirituality's sentiments concerning the power of selfless love to produce universal peace. This book documents the political uses of spirituality by Hindu nationalists: how it can be used to construct emotional identities for groups and individuals, which can be mobilized for particular political ends; how it provides beliefs and practices for regimes of asymmetrical social relations whereby authority and dominance are generated and legitimated.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Based on my Ph.D. dissertation, the research for *Divine Enterprise* was funded by a four-year post-graduate scholarship from the Australian government and supplemented by funds for fieldwork from the Carlyle-Greenwell Bequest of the Department of Anthropology, University of Sydney. The University of Sydney's Post-graduate Rescue Fund kept me afloat for a few months beyond the expiry of the scholarship.

The sources of intellectual and collegial support for this project are numerous. Michael Allen, my Ph.D. supervisor, generously shared his acumen and enthusiasm. Colleagues and friends in Australia who discussed and read my work include Greg Bailey, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Jean Cooney, Noel Gray, Jacqui McGibbon, Jadran Mimica, Kalpana Ram, and Geoffrey Samuel. In the United States, conversations with Nancy and Robert Foster, Richard Fox, John Kelly, Martha Kaplan, Gananath Obeyesekere, and H. L. Seneviratne provided insights into my work. Throughout the long haul, Harry Harootunian encouraged me to persevere.

Affiliation with the Department of Sociology in the Delhi School of Economics at the University of Delhi gave me an entry into academic life in the capital. Professor Jit Singh Uberoi not only agreed to be my "research guide" but also he and Patricia Uberoi shared their formidable intellectual resources with me and often hosted me in their home. Radhika Chopra of the Delhi School familiarized me with the interests of younger scholars and welcomed me into their social world. During visits to Delhi I stayed at times with Sanjay and Sandhya Chatterjee, Shalini Reyes, and Purnima Singh, all of whom contributed friendly and informed interest to my work. Accompanying Lee Siegel in Delhi as he explored the world of conjuring in India refreshed me with the playful side of serious scholarly work.

Foremost among the support I received while in Hardwar came from Bharati Ma, her disciples—Swami Bharati Adyananda, Shobha Ma and

Prema Ma—who live in her ashram, and her devotees who frequent it. Pandit Rajkumar Sharma gave me a guided tour of some of Hardwar's ashrams and he and his family also received me in their home. Suvira Devi of Vedant ashram in Hardwar spoke with me at length about her experiences in ashrams. Mr. and Mrs. Gupta, devotees of Acharya Ram Sharma discussed the teachings of their guru and their active involvement with the Gayatri Parivar. Helen Clapham, a long-term resident in the Hardwar ashram of the Manav Utthan Seva Samiti, assisted in my study of that organization.

Officials at the Divine Life Society in Rishikesh permitted me to stay in the Sivananda ashram on several occasions. Many ashram residents answered my inquiries and I am particularly grateful to Tyagimayi Mata for her keen observations on daily life in the institution. Conversations with Nandini Daly and Devadasi, also residents of Rishikesh, were spiced with witty anecdotes and informed criticisms of the religious institutions and personages around them.

During the years of going and coming back from India, Australia, and the United States, my family has consistently shown interest in and support for my endeavors. Thanks also to Christine De Rosa, Eileen Feibus, and Janet Lynn Kerr for their many years of indulgent friendship. Finally, I am grateful to David Brent and Richard Allen for their editorial expertise.



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ONE

Sumptuary Spirituality

Friendliness and curiosity prompted countless people to ask why I had come to India. When I replied that I was living in the pilgrimage town of Hardwar and studying the work of gurus or religious teachers, Hindus typically responded with enthusiastic approval. I was told my topic was well chosen because gurus are teachers of timeless truths and are India's spiritual and social leaders. In the next breath people might caution me about spurious gurus. Yet, they usually followed this warning with assurances that many genuine gurus could be found in Hardwar and nearby Rishikesh.

Gurus—spurious or genuine—are key players in the business and politics of spirituality. The activities of many gurus and their organizations during the 1980s and 1990s are related to the simultaneous expansion of transnational capitalism in India and growing support for Hindu nationalism in India and abroad. These activities produce spirituality's material manifestations and political effects, and can be located within the circuits of commodity production and exchange, i.e., production of use-values for exchange. As producers and purveyors of spiritual commodities, gurus assist in propagating Hindu nationalism, an ideology that relies on referents to Hindu India's unparalleled spiritual prowess and moral authority. Hindu nationalism is an activist ideology: it underpins a movement led by dominant groups to consolidate their political power by mobilizing an array of disaffected social classes.

The nexus of knowledge, power, and wealth in Indian society is inextricable from the authority of gurus, popularly called “godmen” by speakers of Indian English. Godmen may be women. Devotees worship female and male gurus as living gods. By transmitting authoritative spiritual knowledge to worthy followers, a guru acts as a conduit of spiritual power. Integral to a guru's authority and authenticity is membership in a lineage of — 1