

Chapter 11

“Guruji Rocked . . . Duniya Shocked”

Wondertraps and the Camerawork Guruship of

Dera Sacha Sauda Guru

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On January 25, 2017, at the headquarters of the Dera Sacha Sauda (DSS) devotional order in Sirsa, Haryana, the order’s present guru, Dr. Saint Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Ji Insaan, made his grand entry on an army tank before an audience of tens of thousands of devotees (see fig. 11.1).¹ As the guru progressed forward toward his fan-devotees, “wonder prompts” were delivered via loudspeaker: “Rockstar!” “You can shout! You can enjoy!” “Amazing! Amazing!” User comments beneath the YouTube video of the event repeat terms such as “fantastic,” “fabulous,” “incredible,” “awesome,” “powerful,” and “superb entry.” Other comments include: “Wow that’s a full-scale model of tank”; “Grand people Grand works Grand entries”; and “woooow wonderful papa Jaan”; accompanied by a host of emojis—a showering of kisses and love hearts—expressing the perfection of the spectacle.²

The tank was a one-off, but his grand entry was not: the serial novelty of the guru’s entrances ensured that novelty itself had become the norm. YouTube videos disclose that DSS *satsangs* (devotional gatherings) had become no ordinary *satsangs*. The guru variously entered on modified bikes, cars, and tractors (the latter a nod to his “rural chic”—he hails

from a family of Jat landowner-cultivators and possessed, at least initially, a predominantly rural follower base, with the DSS owning vast swathes of agricultural land around Sirsa, apparently barren until his divine intervention); on some occasions mechanical cranes were employed to create the impression of him descending from the sky or heaven; on others he would be made mechanically to elevate into the devotional arena from underground. If such techniques for the production of awe and surprise in the grand entrance of the guru had been integrated from Bollywood films and live rock and pop concerts, these were roles that he had also already begun to perform. Indeed, given that the DSS was already what we call a “devotion of attractions,” it wasn’t a complete surprise—indeed it seemed fitting—when rumors of the first instalment of his feature film franchise in which the guru would play himself surfaced in 2015.³ Clearly, deployment of modern technological effects and other creative strategies such as his grand entries have played a key role in the production and expansion of his roles and reach.



Figure 11.1. Guru enters on army tank. *Source:* Screenshot from the video titled “Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh’s GRAND Entry on Tank at Hind Ka Napak Ko Jawab Trailer Launch,” on YouTube channel of Bollywood Hungama (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MkJDnrTpuF0&t=178s>).

In particular, his entries in modified vehicles became a kind of trademark, setting him apart from other gurus. Consider the case of Jaggi Vasudev, popularly known as Sadhguru, whose adventurous, “sporty” persona—in particular his fondness for motorbikes—is another such trademark. One video of him riding a motorbike with another popular guru (Hindutva yogi Baba Ramdev) sitting behind him—captioned “Biker Dudes”—became wildly popular in the public domain. We see increasing use of terms belonging to modern urban lingo—rockstar, bling, dude, and so on—that define these diverse gurus in ways that emphasize their “being at home” in India’s post-liberalization era and that seek to attract millennials. The DSS guru, however, is far more cringe-inducing to elite Indian sensibilities than the other two gurus just mentioned: we have mentioned his association with the rural; he is also a guru mired in scandals, including accusations that he had four hundred male devotees castrated. After his imprisonment for rape in 2017, elite disapproval of the DSS as vulgar medieval residue and obstacle to development was ubiquitous—often expressed in a trope of “more in sadness than in anger”: “this is why education is more important in our country”; “Such people have no place in developing India”; “India cannot develop till the time these babas have unnecessary control or influence on Hindus and politics of the nation”; “Is this 21st century India?”; “Damn it what will be the future of India.” Or, as a comment posted on the Reddit r/India forum succinctly put it in reference to devotee-police clashes following the guru’s conviction: “Feels like old r/india.”⁴ All the same, like Ramdev and Sadhguru the DSS guru is supremely at ease before the camera; his guruship, as we shall see, is a *camerawork guruship*.⁵ When asked in an interview about his rockstar persona and penchant for wearing fashionable blingy attires, the DSS guru explained that it formed part of an attempt to make his teachings and welfare measures attractive to young people who, drawn to the DSS, will refrain from taking drugs.⁶ If this suggests that the guru’s adventurous masculine acts were necessary to keep the devotional economy in circulation, it is also (appropriately enough) a classic Bollywood trope, with otherwise suspect acts of self-indulgence and ostentation coming to be sanctioned and recognized as virtuous in the narrative if they can be “demonstrated to be socially useful and out-reaching rather than inward-turning” (Vanita 2002, 155).

Our argument in this chapter is that the DSS guru achieves wonder effects in three principal overlapping ways. These are through the pro-

jection of himself as (1) an inclusive, expandable unity; (2) temporarily inhabiting (dashing in and out of) different forms and identities; and (3) the embodied mixing together or unity of opposites (here we can speak of the “schismatic guru”). We shall draw on and extend the work of Nigel Thrift (2008, 2012) on tactical manipulations and the exploitation of potential, Alberto Corsín Jiménez (2013, 2018) on aggrandizement and traps, the philosophical elucidation of wonder provided by Mary-Jane Rubenstein (2008), and our own previous and ongoing work on the different *methodologies of presence* employed by gurus.⁷

It is because we are in agreement with Mary-Jane Rubenstein’s differentiation of wonder that we use the term “effects of wonder” advisedly. Rubenstein (2008, 21) distinguishes between two kinds of wonder: one mode of wonder “gives birth,” produces “aporetic vertigo” (25), and is marked by radical incompleteness (26). Such wonder comprises an “open sea of endless questioning, strangeness, and impossibility” (21). The other mode of wonder contains no such “wondrous openness” (25). Instead, it is a wonder that “relentlessly seek[s] out new marvels to calculate, comprehend, or possess” (25)—it is appropriative and produces assent through stupefaction. It is not that calculation or rigorous argument is inimical to the first mode of wonder, but rather that “there is an irreducible difference between a rigorous, investigative thinking that sustains wonder’s strangeness and a rigorous, investigative thinking that endeavors to assimilate that strangeness” (25–26). Indeed, let us now follow Rubenstein in clarifying what already may be evident; namely, that the second mode of wonder is not wonder at all but precisely a retreat from it (21). Proceeding from this, we argue that the DSS guru has successfully generated a series of effects of wonder that bear affinity with the second mode of wonder described here—the wonder that is not wonder, or that is “anti-wonder.” There is no aporetic vertigo in the cases we consider in this chapter—everything is reduced to one person. It is a wonder of the “excessive subject” (Thrift 2012)—one that is totalizing, seeking continual expansion and possession. It “keeps [one] chained in stupefied assent to [that which is] ‘self-evident’” (Rubenstein 2008, 21). It displays not the “frightening indeterminacy” (24) of the first mode but only effects of wonder that “uncontain” the guru’s personality the better to “contain” the other; that expand it the better to enfold (possess, appropriate) all subject positions and attention.

Such a language of enfolding and possession suggests our next analytical move, which is to suggest that wonder is staged as a trap: the

DSS generates wondertraps. We do not seek to portray devotees as pitiable, hapless, and hoodwinked. Much has been offered back to them by the guru and the DSS even as they have been trapped by wonder: most prosaically, there are the free health and social services made available to them by the DSS. More profoundly, there is a sense of participating in the personality of the guru, which takes on the form of a kind of community. The DSS guru mobilizes his devotees to conduct social welfare schemes on a massive, world record breaking scale.⁸ Devotees, in forming part of the guru’s enlarged sense of personality, have been able to assume the role of givers in meaningful ways—embodied in the guru’s extended personhood, they give outwards to society in the same movement in which they give to the guru,⁹ allowing his name to travel and kingly charisma based on excessive giving to grow. In one way, the guru’s gift to his economically disadvantaged devotees is to enable them to become givers, too. Here we can consider the etymology of *bhakti*, “bhaj”: “to participate.” Devotees experience a sense of participation, too, in the guru’s high-profile media adventures (a million devotee-extras are reported to have appeared in the guru’s first feature film) and role uptake. This is to say that the guru’s effects of wonder and explosion of subject positions have required devotee buy-in (Thrift 2012)—a degree of mutuality inheres in the entrapment (Corsín Jiménez and Nahum-Claudel 2019, 2; Lucia 2018, 980).

But they are traps nonetheless. The reason for escalating the quantity and diversifying the nature of devotional attractions is to produce a heightened “devotional grip.” Effects of wonder, or wondertraps, require devotional labor that in turn can be put to work to produce more wondertraps, and so on. Devotees become complicit in the predation of more devotees. Consider the modal reciprocity of entrapment and wonder. Corsín Jiménez (2018, 75) writes that “traps capture, caution and captivate; they provoke wonder, suspension and elicitation.” Traps provoke wonder. From the other side, Tulasi Srinivas (2018, 113) writes of how the technicolor “wonders” of Bangalore’s early twenty-first-century temples “fascinated, compelled [and] entrapped” spectators. Wonder provokes entrapment. We conceptualize, then, a predatory wonder, or wonder as predation—but in a manner that leaves room for mutuality and love; or put differently, devotional buy-in. We paraphrase Gebauer and Wulf (1996, 213) on seduction: seduction depends on lending form; the guru-seducer’s weapon, here, is an image. As soon as the object of seduction—the devotee—becomes fascinated by this image, she falls

under the power of the seducer. But only because the object of seduction herself desires does she let herself be seduced.

Exaggeration Procedures

Like other devotional movements with their origins in the north Indian *sant* heritage—“the creed of the saints, a tradition associated with such figures as Kabir and Nanak” (Babb 1986, 17)—the DSS, founded in 1948, is an avowedly social reformist spiritual organization that aims, according to its official website, to “save people from the complex ties, malpractices and superficial rituals that had been afflicting religion.”¹⁰ Its teachings do not markedly differ from other devotional orders that have their origin in the north Indian *sant* heritage. Common to most of these orders is *guru-bhakti*—devotion to a living spiritual master, devotee constituencies made up of both Hindus and Sikhs, an emphasis on the recitation of sacred words, a conception of transcendence as being open to all in this birth regardless of caste or gender, a social reformist agenda, and a set of teachings genealogically derived from a family of nonsectarian *sants*, or saints, which began to emerge in the medieval period. Distinctions between Hindus and non-Hindus and indeed distinctions of caste and other internal differentiations of “community” tend to be downplayed in favor of shared devotional attachment to a spiritual master. DSS teachings emphasize the importance of reciting sacred words (*ram nam*) for the achievement of transcendence, abstaining from alcohol and meat, faithfulness in marriage, and refraining from lying or making religious offerings of money. In tension with the high-profile adventures of the present guru, official DSS teachings propound a strong anti-“show-off” message: “Dera Sacha Sauda does not believe in any kind of false practices, false pretensions, misguidance or any kind of show off which has nothing to do with spiritualism and those ritual practices which take you away from your real goal.”¹¹ The paradox here is not insignificant. We will suggest that such mixing of opposites—aversion to spectacle while conspicuously engaging in it—can be key to the generation of wonder effects.

In our discussions with devotees in Sirsa, they repeatedly drew attention to the absence in the DSS of distracting “rituals” (*rasmien*), something they saw as one of the movement’s key defining features. Instead, they argued, it is through the more direct method of *guru-bhakti*

that spiritual progress results. The movement’s professed aversion to ritual and “show off” (*tamasha*) situates it in a reformist tradition that has been determined to undermine “superstitious ritual.” All this is fairly standard for this devotional milieu. What does set it apart—quite dramatically—from comparable *sant* orders are innovations introduced since the accession to the guruship of Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Ji Insaan in 1990.

It is by way of the novel directions introduced under his leadership that the DSS has achieved distinctiveness and, it must be added, notoriety: for the DSS has in recent years come to possess a very particular relationship with excess. Its leaders and devotees alike understand the movement to be on a very special mission, its guru a figure of the stature of Krishna or Jesus. It seeks massive expansion. When we first began research on the DSS in 2004, it claimed to have one to two million devotees; by 2018 it claimed sixty million.¹² Excess of all kinds: a ramping up of the celebrity status that other spiritual leaders have sought and achieved, which “casts believers as spectators” (Meyer and Moors 2006, 9), is frequently achieved through adept harnessing of new media forms; but there are also the world record-breaking spectacles of “service” inspired by, or achieved because of, the blessings of the guru—such as most blood pressure readings and diabetes screenings in a single day and highest number of people sanitizing their hands simultaneously. More whimsical and fantastic are the records achieved for largest display of oil lamps (150,009), largest finger painting (3,900 m²), and largest vegetable mosaic (185,807 m²) (Roy 2017). The hand sanitization record that the guru inspired is now taken as proof that he had foreknowledge of the COVID-19 pandemic; they evidence him seeking to equip and prepare humanity for what would befall it.¹³ Further, we learn from the guru’s personal website (<https://www.saintdrmsginsan.me>) that under his guidance “more than 115 humanitarian works are being conducted and also 55 world records are registered on his name.” In light of this, “world record university London has decided to grant Him [a doctorate] degree.”¹⁴ Therefore, “from [January 25, 2016] onwards Revered Saint Ji will be addressed as Saint Dr Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Ji Insaan.” Thus it is the guru who is credited for the world records his devotees perform. Moreover, there is an evident slippage between attainment of world records and the production of miraculous results, with the former standing in for but also suggesting the latter. The labor of such wondertrap miracles is performed, of course, by devotees; DSS followers are

responsible for the miracles they attribute to their guru. The participatory production of such miracles and wonder effects is ideologically denied by both the movement's literature and by devotees themselves.

The DSS has also experimented with a hyperpatriotic brand of guruship that in some ways aligns with, yet is not completely reducible to, Modi's Hindutva agenda: massive provision of blood for Indian soldiers, annual Mega Cleanliness Campaigns in association with Modi's Swachh Bharat Abhiyan,¹⁵ and the steroidal nationalism of the guru's feature films. His grand entry astride a tank was consistent with this overall schema, with its staging at the time of India's Republic Day (January 26), a day known for exhibiting the nation's "unity in diversity" and military might, with marching armed regiments and displays of tanks, missiles, and fighter jets. The event—and also the film *Hind ka Napak Ko Jawab: MSG Lion Heart 2* (2017), which thrust the guru into heroic, militaristic, border-defending scenarios¹⁶—merged *desh-* and *guru-bhakti* in support of the hypernationalism currently dominating contemporary Indian politics. Meanwhile, the guru lent his support to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 2014 Lok Sabha and 2015 regional assembly elections.¹⁷ However, rather than transparent backing of and ideological alignment with the Hindutva agenda, the endorsement should be understood, at least partly, in terms of sheer opportunism. For as we have already intimated, serial serious criminality—rape, murder, castration of devotees, expropriation of land—apparently has been another of the DSS guru's modes of excess, and he has seemed to bestow his political endorsements as a means of seeking protection against mounting charges. Indeed, his *dera* operated as something in between a "little fiefdom" (Singh 2017) and a "temple racket" (Michelutti et al. 2018, 158), in which he operated with kinglike extralegal impunity (see Lucia 2018 on the authoritarian structure of guru-disciple relationships; we note also that one of his titles is Maharaj and that his close kin are known as "the royal family").¹⁸ His grand entry on the tank provided a strange reflection of exactly this, for riding a modified vehicle is in violation of Indian law; specifically section 52 of the Motor Vehicles Act, amended in 2000, which grants exceptions only on conditions of permissibility from legal authorities. The exceptional, extralegal, nature of his grand entries in modified vehicles not only reproduced his sovereign figure, but underscored his status as someone apparently beyond the laws of the land. However, if his previous support for the Congress had afforded him a measure of protection, the political winds were such in 2014 that

strategic alignment with the ongoing populist politics of the BJP came to make sense. It “worked” for both parties up to a point—the BJP made gains in the guru’s regions of influence (parts of Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, and to a lesser extent Delhi) and in government it ensured that his first feature film *MSG: Messenger of God* was released, despite the Censor Board’s initial ban on it, a subplot that we discuss further elsewhere (Copeman and Duggal 2023). Eventually, however, the quantity and gravity of the charges against the guru outweighed the protection the BJP was willing or able to give him, and in 2017 the guru was sentenced to twenty years in prison for the rape of two *sadhvis* (female ascetics), while, in 2019, he was convicted for the murder of an investigative journalist and sentenced to life imprisonment. He faces further charges.

This explains the wistful nature of some of the devotee comments on his online videos: “Dr MSG The Great miss you; “You are, you were and you will be my love charger forever”¹⁹; “Happy incarnation day Papa Ji. Miss you Papa Ji. Come soon Papa Ji”; “MSG PAPA JI AAJO JI” (Papa MSG come); “Msg love Pita Ji jldi aao ji pita ji jldi aao ji jldi aao ji pita ji jldi aao ji” (come soon come soon come soon); “Ve aaja mahi, aaja ve, ve aaja mahi, aja ve” (come beloved, come, come beloved, come); “finally pita g Da khatt aa hi gya, pita g ne ishara v. Kiya ha ki jaldi ayega” (pita ji’s letter has arrived, pita ji has hinted that he will come soon); “Sole soothing melody made me to miss more to my MSG papa”; “Miss u a lot Pita g. Plzz come back we alone without you”; “Waiting for saint MSG, jaldi aajo” (come quickly); “A lot of wait my lord Papa”; “Ao jao dharti rakshak ji” (come earth protector).²⁰

Indeed, his arrest and imprisonment marked the moment he became a kind of virtual guru (cf. Lucia 2023): imprisoned though he now was, he remained available to his devotees via his prior recordings on video-hosting platforms such as YouTube, which attain renewed importance as an archive of wondrous effects for keeping the devotion of attractions intact. An instance of the affective mobilization of the media archive of the guru was seen on the incarnation day of DSS founder guru Shah Mastana Ji in 2018, a year after the present guru had entered prison: “A recorded video of Saint Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Insan was played [to attendees], making devotees nostalgic and filled with devotion.”²¹ The following year, on the occasion of the DSS’s Foundation Day, “the congregation program started with the playing of recorded Satsangs of Guru Ji and the followers were absorbed in the sermons and motivational teachings rendered on screens.”²² In 2017, after his imprisonment,

media speculation centered on possible candidates to succeed him and on whether the DSS could survive the guru's downfall at all. But at the time of writing he remains enthroned, prisoner or not. Have devotees lost faith in him? This is difficult to gauge, but not according to our contacts and devotee comments on YouTube. The charges were well known for decades before his eventual imprisonment, during which time the devotee base expanded dramatically; and, indeed, scandals and exposés concerning gurus seem rarely to unseat them—rather, they are often taken by devotees as tests of their devotion, potentially leading to its intensification (Gold 1987; Lucia 2023).²³ The DSS guru's criminal convictions could not be graver, yet one cannot write him off. As we write this in August 2022, he is on parole, residing in Bhagpat, near Delhi. He has periodically sought parole ever since he was first imprisoned—for family reasons and in order to cultivate his fields, say his requests—and since early 2022 it has been granted several times. Various political parties continue to vie for the support of his followers: it is easy to think of what those followers, and indeed the guru himself, might demand in exchange (see Sood 2019). David Graeber's (2008) definition of charisma as the ability to do things you are not supposed to do and get away with it could not be more apt in this case.

As will be apparent, the DSS presents a devotion of the gigantic and the exaggerated (Corsín Jiménez 2013, 77).²⁴ Its claim to possess sixty million devotees may be wildly inaccurate. But still, there is a story worth telling here. How does someone who twenty years ago was an obscure provincial guru come to achieve such an escalation of presence, devotees, and national and international fame? We suggest that effects of wonder lie at the heart of the story, and our task in this chapter is to try to determine how they are generated. We earlier suggested a notion of a devotion of attractions. Famously, Tom Gunning (1990) coined "cinema of attractions" to refer to the dominance of special effects and technological wonders over narrative coherence in early cinematography. Whatever the value or coherence of DSS teachings may be, they have tended to be completely eclipsed—in devotional practice, reportage, and scholarship—in part no doubt by the politics of caste and electoral alliances associated with the movement, but most of all by the sheer escalating spectacle of the guru himself. The message of his guruship progressively came to be outdone by the command "See!"; by devotional novelties; by his ability—like that of the cinema of attractions—to show but far less to tell. He has always enacted a camerawork guruship: when

we spent time at his ashram in 2004, we met sadhus whose sole job they described as “photograph *seva*”—on excursions he was constantly accompanied by at least two cameraman *sadhus*. The results were published in the organization’s newspaper, *Sach Kahoon*, and official press releases; meanwhile, his *satsang* addresses were recorded and distributed in the form of video CDs (they were also streamed into the waiting rooms of the DSS-run clinics we visited). The intermediality of his guruship has since escalated, with his diverse modes of performance gaining traction across various mediums at various levels.²⁵ Whether at his *satsangs* or pop concerts (the line between them came to be blurred), film cameras perennially hovered above devotee-audiences and the stage, where crew members with camera cranes and video dollies could be witnessed recording these events for simultaneous live telecast on the DSS website and elsewhere. In 2014 the guru’s *101 Ru-b-Ru Night* concert at Delhi was live telecasted by six television channels (ETC Punjabi, Zee Jagran, Sadhna, 4Real News, Sanskar and Sarv-Dharam Sangam). Footage from such concerts was then edited with graphics and special effects for use in music videos; for example, his song *Love Charger*, released in 2014 by leading music video channel Vevo (fig. 11.2). The devotional congregation as shooting event made full use of the *bhakt*-spectator crowd; for example, the song *Mein Tujhe Bhool Jau—Never Ever*, which he performed in his first cinema release *MSG: Messenger of God* (2015), features a climax sequence showing the guru performing live in concert among just such a crowd (the 1.3 million devotees who reportedly acted as extras in the film surpassed another world record). Images from such events would later feature in various printed, digital, and virtual platforms across different mediums of communication, distribution, and consumption. We see how the different “modes of exhibition” (Gunning 1990, 65) afforded by the polymedia landscape the DSS was alive to facilitated the expression of the guru’s persona(s) in more and more dimensions.

Exceptional though some of this might appear, it is important not to overstate the case. The DSS’s devotion of attractions does not exist in a vacuum—we can think of the larger burgeoning landscape of “Disney divinity” (Srivastava 2009) it belongs to and of multiple past and present instances of guru-focused excess and theatricality; and, certainly, many other gurus, too, have proliferated their roles and wider presences well beyond the bounds of the ashram.²⁶ Precedents exist for many of the “unusual” maneuvers of the DSS guru. Yet, for all that, the DSS guru’s experiments in wonder should be acknowledged as novel and innovative



Figure 11.2. Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Ji Insan performing on stage with psychedelic effects projected on background screen in “Love Charger” music video. *Source*: “Saint Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Ji Insan—Love Charger,” on YouTube channel DeraSachaSaudaVEVO (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q48tagwurUw>).

insofar as a large enough quantitative shift becomes a qualitative one. For this alone they deserve investigation, but also because the very hyperbole of the DSS guru’s devotion of attractions can help us to comprehend more general aspects of the production of wonder; his case affords, in other words, the technicolor disclosure of (certain and more mundane?) techniques of guruship.

This chapter thus seeks to provide a provisional account of the DSS guru’s experiments in wonder—for the DSS guru has indeed succeeded in generating effects of wonder, as evidenced in the comments from devotees that we disperse throughout this chapter and by growth in follower numbers. These comments are predominantly “user comments” below the line of YouTube music videos featuring the guru in spectacular pop-star mode. Hence they hold a particular sense of immediacy: devotees are either watching or have just watched the videos they offer comments on. At the same time, the comments contain rhetoric that undoubtedly is prompted by official DSS “talking points.” For instance, official DSS literature makes much of the guru’s “versatility,” which is also a notable feature of devotees’ praise for their guru as found in user comments. Such comments, in other words, are an interesting mixture

of the scripted and the unfiltered immediate. We turn now to some accounts of the guru’s wonder effects.

Pop Star

One mode of the guru’s expansion and proliferation of presence is his pop stardom. In 2012 he released his first self-composed album of devotional melodies. Since then, he has embraced mainstream rock and pop music. Indeed, his singing is a central point of attraction among his followers (and also a matter of great curiosity to nonfollowers). This has led to additional personas and appellations, such as “Rock-star Saint” and “Love Charger Baba,” used by both the popular media and his followers. The massive rock concerts he stages both connect with and depart from the more traditional form of *satsangs*, thereby expanding our normative understanding of congregational religiosity. Departing from the daily delivery of spiritual discourses in his *Ruhani Majlis* (sacred gatherings), but at the same time reproducing them in another form, he now became the Rock-star Saint who was able to perform in various genres such as bhangra, pop, hip-hop, and rap, and also in various languages, thereby finessing the expansion of his spiritual enterprise.²⁷ These languages—Hindi, Punjabi, Haryanvi, Rajasthani, and English—are the languages of the north Indian states where the major base of DSS followers is located, and also where the guru performed a remarkable series of 101 *Ru-b-Ru* (face-to-face) rock concerts in 2014.

The final concert, which took place at the Ramlila grounds of the national capital on April 27, 2014, was advertised as follows: “After 100 successful divine musical nights, Revered Saint Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Ji Insaan is all set to rock the capital of India. . . . Main highlights of the event will be Live concert by Revered Guru Ji on songs written & composed by HIMSELF, cultural program and face-to-face interaction with Guru Ji. . . . The event will be a fusion of spiritual and modern music and enlighten every heart with bliss and ecstasy, never experienced.”²⁸ A DSS blog described how at the concert

a sea of people converged . . . to celebrate the name of God, and lose themselves in Divine music, creating a history of sorts. The melodies of Guruji, the thunderous applause of the spell-bound audience seemed to have frozen time in its tracks. Over

50 million viewers, across the world, enjoyed a live telecast of the program, and learnt more about 101 programs of social welfare initiated by the Guruji. . . . It seemed that the earth and the sky joined hands to dance to the melodious music and throbbing beats of Guruji's compositions. . . . It seemed like a celebration of life, everyone expressing joy his own way. Some clapped, some hooted, others broke into a jig, waved handkerchiefs, or released balloons in the sky. . . . Religions faded into oblivion, as Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Christians mingled with each other, dancing together in ecstasy.²⁹

The event was titled 101st Wonder Kohinoor Diamond Jubilee Masto Mast Ruhani Ru-b-Ru Night. The name of the concert series, *Ru-b-Ru* (face-to-face), foregrounds the "directness" of the performance, while the word "Wonder" is juxtaposed with "Kohinoor Diamond." One of the world's largest cut diamonds, the Kohinoor is currently in the possession of the Queen of England. Famously taken from India by British colonizers, it remains the subject of contestation between the two countries. As a brand name, Kohinoor denotes premium-end products and authentic quality; for example, Kohinoor Authentic Platinum Basmati Rice. Its symbolic sequestration by the "baba of bling" seemed appropriate enough. Indeed, the stage consisted of a large-scale replica of the diamond, with the guru's throne placed at its head: "The stage was like a diamond, 16 feet high. How the diamond stage was firmly stationed was another mystery. Its narrow tip rested on the ground and the broad end rose all the way up. Later, the engineers revealed to Saying Truth, that they had failed to come up with a suitable structure design since a top-heavy stage would have been unstable."³⁰ The impossible became possible, in other words, due to the guru's visionary guidance and design. There were, in addition, a revolving stage, fireworks, dazzling rotating spotlights and psychedelic projections on a massive screen. Dancers and acrobats were brought in from Africa and Indian reality television shows like *Dance India Dance* and *India's Got Talent*. The guru's costume changes apparently were limitless.

The gigantic stage backdrop was decorated with symbols and figures popularly associated with the world of fantasy and the cosmos, such as mountains, fairies, conches, swans, unicorns, golden stars, moons, and glittering water flowing out of mountains, borrowed from the aesthetics of mass produced bazaar or calendar art.³¹ In such art, scenic landscapes

indexing “freshness, fecundity and plentitude” (Jain 2002, 46) are markers of auspiciousness. Here, then, the guru is center stage locus of auspiciousness, plentitude, and fulfillment of desired hopes. The usage of material objects associated with shine and dazzle conjure divine radiance as “they imitate the sky, dazzling like the golden sun, ‘*suryan polle,*’ and the diamond-like stars, a cosmological metaphor overflowing with wonderment and beauty. As in Vedic alchemy, gold is illuminating and cosmic; it radiates divine energy and power” (Srinivas 2018, 112). The aesthetics of bling embodied in the DSS guru and his spectacular concerts not only create wonder effects but also the desire for fulfillment of the hopes of followers in his depiction as a desirable, aspirational figure capable of fulfilling the aspirations of followers.

Fashion Icon

Consider the cover image of DSS publication *Spiritual Fusion: Fashion—the Revolutionary Era*, which presents the guru as a fashion icon. The image depicts the camera itself as a stage set for the DSS guru, who himself sits before a camera. The overbearing presence of the camera not only foregrounds the significance of photography, film, and video within DSS visual culture, but also meta-reflexively depicts how the guru’s image “rests” on the (stage and throne-like) form of the camera and its function (see Duggal 2015, 164). Having oneself enthroned on the machine of one’s image production places in tandem the desirable eye of the camera and the desired subject; captured is not only the eye of the camera but also that of the viewer. ‘The frontal desirable (*darshanic*) eye of the camera functions as a vehicle of the guru’s eyesight, looking straight onto the viewer’s face, which also renders the viewing subject a desired (to be photographed [wondertrapped]) subject’ (Duggal 2015, 164). Who desires who? The devotee desires the guru, as is convention. But what is the guru’s desire? For devotees? For more and more versions of himself? These things are not necessarily isolable: since those “more and more” versions always contain his devotees, his (and their) desire is also for more and more versions of his devotees. If they contain one another then mutual desire is simultaneously self-desire. This reflects our earlier point that, if the guru is glorified, so are his devotees, to the extent that they participate in him. The power of the guru, enacted through vision, is fascinatingly poised: if conventional narrative cinema

invisibilizes spectators—rendering them almost voyeurs—in the cinema of attractions “the attraction does not hide behind the pretense of an unacknowledged spectator” (Gunning 1993, 44). The DSS guru, similarly, gazes back at his devotees. The relationship established through the gaze is neither a Foucauldian one of power-knowledge nor the simplistic obverse, tapping power by making oneself seen by others (in the right way). Rather, it tells of the *complicity* (43)—what we earlier termed the mutual entrapment—that characterizes the guru-devotee relationship.

Consider also his dress. His “spiritual style” reflects the DSS’s claim to be the “Confluence of all Religions,” with his sartorial choices seeking to contain all heterogeneities—different religions, regions, caste, cultures, and traditions—in a kind of collective image. Similar to Swami Vivekananda’s studio portraits, the DSS guru engages in the “conscious production of self-image for the other,” becoming “both a spokesman and that of which he speaks” (Prasad 2014, 575–76). In the case of Vivekananda, we see a resolve in “the way[s] I want others to see me” (576) and also a struggle for self-image whereby he could become a particular iconographic form through which he is still identified and remembered in the public imagination. However, in the case of the DSS guru, stabilization of image is not the point—it is the act of experimentation, the desire to expand, include, and modify styles of attire from different cultural traditions that is foregrounded. The aspiration to continuously re-present himself through renewed sartorial self-imaging—his “unique heterogeneity”—is itself the identity.

On the one hand every image of him in new attire depicts him in a novel form (*roop*). On the other, this form is temporary and incomplete—which leads to further possibilities of exploration. Such heterogeneous representations function as highlights in the guru’s spiritual functions, such as in the form of massive hoardings representing him in *naye-naye paridhano ke akarshak andaz*³² (the unique attractive traits of his new-new attires), and in his spiritual concerts. Such image-making suggests he can only be grasped through the totality of all of these images. The inconclusiveness of his representations also offers choice (Warrier 2003) to his followers—they can pick out whichever image-form they wish to connect with. Curiosity is maintained: What image will come next? In the afterlife of these *ruhani mehfiles* (evenings of spiritual entertainment) other means for circulation of his image include studio portraits in printed materials (hoardings, magazines), video performances, and most recently feature films (Copeman and Duggal 2023).

In the period of colonial modernity, writes Madhava Prasad (2014, 577), “while other secular middle-class customers went to the studio for family photographs embellished with English props, the spiritually minded too seem to have found in the studio the right settings in which to try out their newfound self-images.” Prasad is concerned here with the studio portraits and image-making practices of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. In the case of images of the DSS guru, the studio setting, with its painted backgrounds and props, is replaced by digitally manipulated (photoshopped) versions of the same. Photomontage background effects transport the guru into settings such as that of a European palace, or equally take him to freezing north pole–like locales; and, digitally manipulated though they are, the various postures adopted of standing, sitting, and kneeling remain inspired by more traditional studio photography.

This aesthetics of variety—the guru placed in various settings and styles of attire and pose in photoshopped photomontage—is gathered and anthologized in the aforementioned collector’s item *Spiritual Fusion: Fashion—the Revolutionary Era*. A six-volume set akin to an album or catalogue, it is designed for a certain kind of class consumption. Though expensively priced at 1,500 rupees—with superior printing quality synonymous with high-end fashion magazines—it nevertheless forms part of the guru’s broader attempt to scale up his presence beyond and across domains and registers: spiritual, musical, film, and now fashion model and icon. Despite its sophistication, however, the publication retains the aesthetic imprint of the cheaply available photomontage calendars of roadsides, bazaars, and framing shops. It presents broad bases of referentiality, with local, folk/regional, and rural chic modes of attire and picture composition finding their place alongside images that place the guru in urban, world-wrapping settings.

The DSS’s hybrid stylizations are frequently seen by nonfollowers as a derivative form of aesthetic such as “kitsch.” He is the bejeweled and flashy “guru of bling.” Ashis Nandy (2015) argues that non-elite gurus like Ram Rahim “are not drawing from ancient spiritual traditions; they have no access to those traditions. They are imitating spirituality as it is reconstructed in popular culture.” For Nandy, “the gaudiness one sees is a result of this tension. . . . It is a borrowed aesthetic: you are trying to break into some of the glamour you see around, but you can’t get the pitch right.” From the point of view of nonfollowers and elites, Nandy has a point—but *only* from that point of view. Controversial spiritual master Osho née Rajneesh (1931–90) wore jewels, too (Kakar 2008,

14), but one should not forget the difference between the two. If Osho delivered sophisticated Zen and Nietzschean-style discourses wearing Rolex watches having arrived by Rolls-Royce and cultivated a “class” of elite followers, the DSS guru is generally considered to be gaudy and crass (for one critic exhibiting a “cringing parade of crazy costumes” [Roy 2017], to take just one example), and for his decidedly non-elite followers—for whom he is “Rockstar Pita Ji” and “Our Honey Singh”³³—the pitch is just right; that is to say, it works. Neither are DSS aesthetics derivative in any simple sense. Rather, they frequently express a novel conjunctural aesthetic language. The heterogeneity of the associations he draws into himself move beyond derivativeness or copy; he is a kind of embodied remix (Lessig 2012, 164).

The guru as embodied remix can create controversy and lead to confusion—as when he was subject to bans and assassination attempts following a notorious occasion in 2007 when he dressed up as Guru Gobind Singh.³⁴ He was then accused by mainstream Sikh organizations of seeking to pass himself off as the revered final living Sikh master.³⁵ He was in a way, but only temporarily—it was just another of his “unique attractive . . . new-new attires.” He no doubt did lift ritual and sartorial elements from the Sikh tradition, but soon enough he was dressing up as other iconic figures; he is a guru who lifts the auras of others, quickly moving on, continually remixing himself. The temporariness of the inhabitation allows for deniability, while begging the question “What next?” and enhancing the acceleration effects of the movement. Perhaps it was the depthlessness of the appropriation more than anything else that offended mainstream Sikh sentiments. An abiding image for us derives from an unofficial film made in response to the DSS guru’s mediatized actions—smartphone footage uploaded onto YouTube shows orthodox Sikhs throwing their *chapsals* (sandals) at TV screens depicting him.³⁶

The DSS guru achieves wonder effects (and on occasion consternation), then, through temporary inhabitation of different forms and identities. This is a guru who never stands still. As one devotee, who having only just watched the “wonderful amazing superb . . . awesome” Love Charger video starring the guru, put it rather curtly: “now waiting for something new.”³⁷ For Roy (2017), MSG similarly provided the “curious hook of ‘What next and how much bigger . . .’” Writing of contemporary trends in the qualification of commodities, Thrift (2012, 151) points to the “art of building attachments, of continually restarting the work of association. The overall goal is to produce, often for only

the briefest of moments, a kind of secular magic by forming collectives, temporary gestalts to use Merleau-Ponty’s filmic description, which have pull through their ‘whatever singularity,’ an internally plural collectivity understood as that which has an ‘inessential commonality,’ a solidarity that in no way concerns an essence.” Indeed, the brevity of the guru’s prolific associations (their “inessentiality”), as we have noted, disarms potential claims of appropriation while simultaneously forming the association nonetheless; it also contributes to the excitement. The filmic nature of Merleau-Ponty’s description is apt, for film affords the guru’s diverse images a flickering momentariness that contributes to generating these sorts of (non)association. Such experimental traversal of difference might seem to be for him only; yet he also provides access points for his devotees inasmuch as they form part of the collective personhood enacting the traversal.

His name itself is also used to build an ecology of associations and embodied remix. A guru of novel forms (*roop*) and temporary possession, his name’s expansive instability is not dissimilar to, is even a form of, his “unique attractive . . . new-new attires”—the ever-changing nature of which suggests his ungraspability. When we first became interested in the DSS in 2004 his official name was Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, though devotees would also call him Hazoor Maharaj or simply Pita Ji. His official title, in combining names from Sikhism, Hinduism, and Islam, advertised the movement’s professed secularism, and also the guru’s claim to be the embodied confluence of those faiths. It had already been expanded from plain Gurmeet Singh; the insertion of “Ram” and “Rahim” acting to “brighten the halo around his syncretic claims, with an eye at perhaps broadening the base of his clientele from varied religious affiliations” (Singh 2017, 21). But the already spacious name wouldn’t stay still or contained. By 2016 his name was recorded in film credits as Doctor Saint Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Ji Insan. We have discussed the adoption of “Doctor.” The name “*Insan*”—“Human”—was adopted in 2007, since when all baptized devotees have been expected to shun their family names and take this name instead. His name will not stand still—restless and tumescent, constantly spilling over, enfolding (possessing) numerous religious identities and indeed all of humanity (*insan*). (And this is just his official name: Rockstar Saint, Baba of Bling, Dr MSG, and Lionheart are only some of the unofficial ones.)

In one of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s most famous reflections on names he says:

At one extreme, the name is an identifying mark which, by the application of a rule, establishes that the individual who is named is a member of a preordained class (a social group in a system of groups, a status by birth in a system of statuses). At the other extreme, the name is a free creation on the part of the individual who gives the name and expresses a transitory or subjective state of his own by means of the person he names. But can one be said to be really naming in either case? The choice seems only to be between identifying someone else by assigning him to a class, or, under cover of giving him a name, identifying oneself through him. One therefore never names: one classes someone else if the name is given to him in virtue of his characteristics and one classes oneself if, in the belief one need not follow a rule, one names someone else “freely,” that is, in virtue of characteristics of one’s own. And most commonly one does both at once. (1966, 181)

The guru’s name is an extreme example of the name as a free creation of the individual, albeit he does not name another but himself. On the one hand his name seems not to comply with Lévi-Strauss’s schema—its expansiveness and instability make it seem unclassifiable. Boundary-crossing, it is an example of what we have called elsewhere a both/and name (either/or names, conversely, seek to reduce identity to singularity; neither/nor names seek to evade all identity).³⁸ On the other hand, the guru’s name is classificatory in a negative sense in classifying his very unclassifiability. It points to his inability to be pointed at (Das 2015); that is to say, his ungraspability. His name is also a kind of story (Ingold 2011) or document of history (Brink-Danan 2010), with changes to it chronicling the different stages of the guru’s encompassment of subject positions—the way in which he includes in order to extend. The DSS guru is not alone in engaging in such promiscuous inclusivism or “trapping” of difference; the guru-scape is replete with instances—for example, Sathya Sai Baba’s prolific associational additions (Srinivas 2010). It is the extent and intensity of the DSS guru’s remixing—and to some degree the novelty of the tools he employs (e.g., attires, medias, names)—that singles him out.

Amanda Lucia (2014, 244–45) has questioned our earlier conception of uncontainability (or “including in order to extend”) as a heuristic for comprehending the varied methodologies of presence employed by

different orders of provincial, national, and global guru in India’s recent history. For Lucia, it can appear to amplify the stories gurus tell about themselves, endorsing their own self-narrativization.³⁹ We welcome the critique, which is mostly persuasive and certainly nuanced; indeed, elsewhere Lucia provisionally endorses an analytic of uncontainability (e.g., 2021, 2022) with the proviso that it be recognized as a “constructed reality” (Lucia 2014, 245). Since we enormously admire Lucia’s work, and perhaps also run the risk of reenacting here some of the modes of analysis she is disquieted by, we briefly respond: no doubt, in the earlier work, we did not say what we wanted to say clearly or often enough, for our interest has been precisely in gurus’ means of producing (“constructing”) effects contributive to their seeking to be other than, or more than, they are. In the present instance, these effects are wonder effects that in turn feed into other effects such as expansion of the movement. One has to admit that the associative labor engaged in by gurus has often been quite successful—the form of subjecthood that we have called an inclusive singularity is in many cases a sociological reality.⁴⁰ While we do not necessarily concur that the analyst’s job is to “challenge” guru self-narrativizations (245)—though no doubt there are occasions where this is called for (e.g., Lucia 2018; McCartney 2018)—we agree with Lucia that the analyst must take care to go beyond breathless description of these and acknowledge that our previous analyses might not have achieved the right balance in this respect. Even so, we maintain that our purpose here and elsewhere has been to give an account of how the associative labor process operates and of the logics informing gurus’ varied methodologies of presence. Here, for instance, we have examined an onomastic means of progressive other-incorporation that couples together techniques of expansion and instability, and also how an aesthetics of variety produced through studio portraiture, choice of attire, and remix can contribute to the production of effects of incorporative ungraspability. The effects were not divorced analytically from their means of production; moreover, we have highlighted those instances where these processes find their limits.⁴¹

Reflection: Camerawork Guruship and *Bhakti* at the Speed of Light

We return now to our provisional schema of the guru’s wonder effects, wondertraps, and methodologies of presence, suggesting an analogy

between the DSS guru and the pop star Madonna—and not only because the former, too, became a pop star. For decades Madonna fascinated publics, including scholarly ones, for “exploding boundaries” and for her experiments in identity (Kellner 1995, 263)—her own brand of uncontainability. But if she symbolizes “experimentation, change, and production of one’s individual identity,” she does so as part of a high-level marketing strategy. Similarly, the guru’s camerawork guruship—experimentation with genres, styles, and technologies and varied appeals to our visual senses—lies at an intersection in which desire is created in the spectator-devotee and the guru is created as a desirable figure. Comparable to Madonna, he is deeply invested in fashion and its offering of “choices of clothes, style, and image”; the “perpetual innovation” (264) and restlessness that are its hallmark are in tune with and augment his own cultivated instability of presence—his dashing into and out of associations; and if, for Madonna, “her sometimes dramatic shifts in image and style suggested that identity was . . . something that one produced, and [could be] modified at will [such] that one’s appearance and image helps produce what one is,” the guru’s not dissimilar shifts in image and style might take on a heightened significance in a land of ascribed caste and religious identities. For instance, his projection of caste (Jat) pride in the film *Jattu Engineer* (2017), in this view, might be understood as just another performance—one that questions the essentiality of the identity it imitates. Not only caste essence but also that of the “true guru” are disclosed as production techniques via the hyperbole of his dressing up, which like the relation of drag to “proper” gender (Butler 1998, 722), enacts the structure of performance and impersonation by which guruship very frequently is assumed. Of particular relevance is how Madonna’s “marketing strategies successively targeted different audiences. While she appealed to young teenage girls in her early work, she quickly incorporated minority audiences with her use of Hispanic and black figures and culture in her videos and stage performances” (Kellner 1995, 277). Similarly, we have seen how the guru’s progressive role expansion (e.g., in order to attract youthful devotees) was designed as a means of “successively incorporating different audiences into [his] orbit” (277). Also in common is their embracement of contradictions (and profiting from them) (278), aesthetics of shock, excess, and tastelessness (284) and appropriative “trapping” of difference. In their different ways, the two figures continually seek to go beyond themselves (283). Like Madonna in regard to the category “pop star,” Ram Rahim seemed to push the

category of “guru” beyond previous boundaries, subverting established rules, conventions, and limits and “always trying to develop something new” (285). His devotion of attractions—grand entries, live concerts, “new-new” sartorial avatars and films—portray different modes of (ever growing) bigness and incorporative agency achieved through modern technology, varying from the digital camera and revolving stage to cranes and cinema screens, and across multiple platforms of production, dissemination, and consumption. Thus developed the guru’s schismatic, trap-laden effects of wonder.

The early history of photography is replete with instances in which potential subjects of the new technology sought to evade “capture” by the photographic lens (Pinney 2011). The DSS guru’s camerawork guruship consists of beckoning the camera to himself in repeated enactments of self-capture, the better to distribute many and varied visual self-iterations across time and space in the cause of viewer-devotee captivation through bedazzlement. We have seen how the embodied two-way visual exchange of *darshan* remains significant but also is not the only scopic register at stake in the process. At least as important in his camerawork guruship is the production of views that “confound the eye through bedazzlement [and] inscrutability,” with “clothing, gesture, and jewellery—the way such objects shine, move, and conceal”—operating not “simply as accessories to the main spectacle” (Dinkar 2021, 77) but central to the production of nonreciprocal modes of captivation through bedazzlement. His is not the only camerawork guruship, of course. We referred earlier to photographic portraits of Vivekananda, and it is worth emphasizing the keen interest he took in these portraits, their evident captivating power, and connectedly the significant role they played in popularizing the Ramakrishna Mission (Beckerlegge 2012). The magnetic pull of photographs of Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950), glimpsed on posters or book covers in an array of global locations, have caused hitherto completely unaffiliated observers to travel directly to his ashram in Tamil Nadu (Chowdhuri 2023), which itself is an “ashram of photographs.”⁴² Evidently, the DSS guru is far from alone in pursuing a guruship within the photographic frame.

Yet there are several distinguishing features. First, is the DSS guru’s uniquely intense embrace of the “exorbitant flow” (Pinney 2019, 205) of photography; a kind of Benjaminian espousal of the camera’s ability to create “disruptive cutoffness, its surrealistic potential to create new revolutionary alignments [and] destabilize the familiar reality to which

ordinary human vision binds us” (205). His “revolutionary era” fashion photos, in particular, create Benjaminesque unfamiliar alignments and associations. Pinney contrasts the type of photography valorized by Benjamin with the “sensual plenitude” of digital photography, which allows an image to be “everywhere at once, accessible from any point in the network establishing a regime of intoxication and plenitude through its rapid multiplication and profusion” (Rubenstein and Sluis 2013, 30). But, of course, this too perfectly accords with the DSS guru’s own desire to be everywhere at once. The guru’s surrealist fashion shots are also subject to—and this is precisely the point—intense intermedial maneuvers, as they partake, in particular, of digital photography’s “rolling frontier of superabundance” (Pinney 2019, 208), spreading within and beyond devotee WhatsApp groups, intoxicating viewers, and augmenting a guruship of profusion. The second difference is suggested by the first: if Ramana Maharshi’s acquiescence to devotees who repeatedly wished to photograph him indicated a kind of self-denial—a surrender to the will of the photographer; a kind of “unselfing” (Chowdhuri 2023)—the DSS guru’s relationship to the camera could not be more different. Camerawork is employed as a set of practices of self intensification/extensification—further means of intensifying the intensity of his guruship, enacting self-multiplication, and pursuing a mode of visually heterogeneous omnipresence that might stand (in) for omniscience. Photography, it has been argued, resists totality and a sense of the absolute on account of its birth at a time of secular modernity that it mirrors and takes forward (Taminiaux 2009,12). Moreover, its constant dissemination allies it with the familiar and mundane; that is to say, the non-ultimate (12). In truth, many cases, including Western ones, could probably be marshalled to question such claims. The DSS guru’s camerawork guruship—in which constant dissemination of “new-new” images forms part of an exaggeration process that “throws human concepts up to the heavens and believes with ‘hyperbolic naivety’ that they could be objectivized there” (Sloterdijk 2017, 167)—enables us to see clearly enough how photography can be recruited into the pursuit of a totalizing fantasy.

Further, it is worth briefly dwelling on how the different temporalities enfolded in the DSS contribute to its production of wondertraps. The guru’s instability of presence that we just highlighted in reference to restless “fashion” is a feature of the temporary inhabitations (of associations, identities) that we have pointed to as a driver of wonder effects. The “dashing” nature of the guru’s associative labor marries well

with—participates in—the movement’s culture of rush. From the miracles generated via time compression, to the release of four guru-starring feature films in two years, and so on, this is *bhakti* at the speed of light. The “new-new” attires and, if we may, “what nextness” of the order, find expression in the title of the compilation of portraits of the guru discussed earlier: *Spiritual Fusion: Fashion—the Revolutionary Era*. Devotee comments similarly refer to “total revolution in music”; “never seen in the history of movie industry.”⁴³ Devotees exhibit a perception of their being permitted entry into a world of “the never having been done before.” Their vital participation in the accomplishment of world records is the most literal manifestation of this. However, if these temporalities of revolution, brevity, and rush seem to recall those of the cinema of attractions, a further critical temporality embodied by the DSS makes the connection explicit, for, as with its cinematic forbear, “rather than a desire for an (almost) endlessly delayed fulfilment and cognitive involvement in pursuing an enigma,” the devotion of attractions “arouses a curiosity that is satisfied by surprise” (Gunning 1993, 44). The basic temporality of attractions, argues Gunning, is “that of the alternation of presence/absence that is embodied in the act of display” (44). We can think here, in particular, of the guru’s grand entries as just such an “intense form of present tense”: appearing “out of nothing” astride an army tank, descending from the sky, or elevated from below, his varied realizations of presence from absence take the form of “staccato jolts of surprise” (or “sudden burst[s] of presence”) (45). Does this engender wonder? For Descartes, value-free, “wonder simply prompts us to focus our attention on whatever has taken us by surprise”; while, for Heidegger, awe is always renewed by the surprise conditioning it (Rubenstein 2008, 38, 111). But the wonder the philosophers were considering was a wonder that keeps questions open. The surprising realizations of the guru, on the other hand, produce something else: an astonishment that captivates (takes captive) and brooks no questions at all.

We have followed Rubenstein in understanding wonder as a quality that eludes rather than possesses us. As she puts it, “mastery that proceeds by means of certainty and exceptionless appropriation” is “inimical to wonder” (2008, 25). Following from this, we can see that if the DSS guru generates wonder it is in the mode of *possessive wonder* (where what is possessed ranges from devotees to subject positions, identities, attention, and more). For Rubenstein, as we have seen, such possessive wonder is not wonder at all, for it seeks to assimilate encountered strangeness

rather than sustain it (26). This clarifies our use of the term “wonder effects.” We have described a kind of toolkit for the relentless production of such effects, which fix and “trap” spectators; for, undoubtedly overwhelming as devotees’ experiences have been, the open multiplicity of such marvels is always assimilated to, or reduced back down to, one figure of possession—as one devotee put it, “pitaji u are the only one who is all in one.”⁴⁴

Devotee comments that appreciatively call attention to the guru’s all-in-oneness are, as we have mentioned, in part DSS-scripted talking points. The *Hind Ka Napak Ko Jawab* movie trailer highlights the “42 Spectacular Roles [performed in its realization] by Dr. MSG Insan”: direction, action, music, stunts, special effects, makeup, costume design, and more; while the guru’s own website declaims his remarkable “versatility” and “multi-talented” personality—he is “Spiritual Saint; Writer; Musician; Director; Scientist; Feminist; Youth Icon; etc.”⁴⁵ Despite this, it is evident that his all-in-oneness inspires awe in devotees: “You, your voice, your music, your lyrics, your walk, your talk”; “Never seen so many varieties in a single album”; “HE is an all-rounder”; “to have so much in one person is more than a miracle”; “HE will be the only man in Bollywood who is so versatile.”⁴⁶

“All in one” phraseology is, of course, inspired by commodity labeling and advertisements, and its usage to describe the DSS guru should be understood as “more than an analogy”: “all in one” is indeed his marketing strategy. The logic and phenomenon are not novel. The expansive, encompassing qualities of “guru personhood” across time and space have been well documented. The “all in one” phrase marks a quality of excessive subjecthood common to many a guru who contains many. It is the pitch, scope, and explicitization of the case described here that cause it to be distinctive: the very “constitutive excess” (Mazzarella 2010, 727) of the DSS guru and his propensity to enfold, trap, and possess. The commodity derivation of the “all in one” phrase points, appropriately enough, to the guru’s simultaneous borrowing from and participation in techniques of what has been called “full-palette capitalism” (Thrift 2008, 30). Such a full-palette guruship, similar to contemporary trends in the extraction of value, “relies on a series of practices of intensification” and “extensification” (30), since his approach has been to construct himself as “resonating” in many sensory registers at once, increasing both the range of appeal and its stickiness (what we might call devotional grip) (39). This partly develops from the combining of commodity and wonder logics.

Scholars frequently suggest that “coincidence” or “mixing-up of opposites” are key provocations of wonder (Rubenstein 2008, 18). Connectedly, Steven Shaviro (2006) has discussed recently honed marketing techniques which propose that products should simultaneously fulfil contrary and seemingly mutually exclusive desires, thereby covering the range of possible consumer dispositions. In his novel *The Savage Girl*, Alex Shakar (2002, 60–61) introduces the idea of paradessence, short for “paradoxical essence.” It refers to depictions of commodities by marketers: “Every product has this paradoxical essence. Two opposing desires that it can promise to satisfy simultaneously.” Paradessence is the “schismatic core, [the] broken soul, at the center of every product” (60). For instance, “coffee promises both ‘stimulation and relaxation’; ice cream connotes both ‘eroticism and innocence,’ or (more psychoanalytically) both ‘semen and mother’s milk.’ . . . The paradessence is not a dialectical contradiction; its opposing terms do not interact, conflict, or produce some higher synthesis” (Shaviro 2006, 12). As Shakar (2002, 179) puts it, the paradessence is a matter of “having everything both ways and every way and getting everything [one] wants.” Shaviro points out that Shakar’s concept of paradessence, initially proposed as a kind of “model of” contemporary “postironic” advertising culture quickly evolved into a “model for” it. One marketing “guru,” speaking at a United States conference of advertising executives, explicitly drew on *The Savage Girl* in declaring, “It is the things that can promise two, mutually exclusive things that thrive.”⁴⁷

The DSS guru similarly embodies the coincidence of opposites. We suggest this embodiment contributes to his generation of wonder effects. Let us return to Graeber’s (2008) pithy conception of charisma as doing what you are not supposed to do and getting away with it. An individual’s simultaneous repudiation and enactment of *tamasha* and ostentation might lead, for one with little or no charisma, to accusations of hypocrisy. For the guru’s followers at least, it only enhances the effect of wonder—his all-in-oneness is underscored. “Having everything both ways and every way” might be his official slogan. His paradessence is of a piece with his all-encompassing sovereign presence: capaciously embodying contrary and seemingly mutually exclusive principles and desires, he covers the range of possible devotee dispositions. Without interaction or synthesis between the opposing principles, he embodies and projects both transcendence of caste (the name *Insan*, human, borne by him and his followers, was explicitly instituted as a means of

transcending and invalidating *jati*) and caste pride (as in his film *Jattu Engineer*). Army tank driver and stockpiler of weaponry (see Copeman and Duggal 2023), the guru of MSG nonetheless celebrates—and seeks to claim affiliation with—“Gandhi’s message of winning one’s opponent through non-violence” (Roy 2017). In the same film he “addresses himself as fakir, but is seen in elaborate never-repeating costumes that feature some [of the most] heady imaginations with bling that you would ever see” (Roy 2017). The paradessence of the guru inscribes a devotional world in which one does not know negatives. Contraries are not commensurated but simply contained, “all in one.”

We have described the coimplication of entrapment and wonder, and how devotee labor is frequently required to set the wondertraps via which the replenishment and augmentation of the same labor supply is accomplished, which in turn enables more wondertraps to be set. At the same time, a model of predatory wonder must be balanced out by recognizing the degree of mutual complicity, or devotee buy-in, that inheres in it. Devotees “travel with” the guru, partaking of the personality they expand—a kind of love relationship with one’s own expanded sense of self. While we have seen how “storage” of the virtual guru in the online archive can help to sustain the devotional relationship and production of wonder effects, more work is required on how this relationship may have been affected after the guru was imprisoned in 2017. Given the rush and revolution of the previous years, it is easy to imagine how—archival resources notwithstanding—the new devotional temporality of sudden stillness and quiet might have been a very unsettling one indeed for devotees.

Notes

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1. The Hindi word *duniya*, in the title of this chapter, means “world.”

2. See the YouTube video “Sant Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Makes a Grand Entry at Hind Ka Napak Ko Jawab Trailer Launch” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DyoEbSUDYBc>).

3. See Copeman and Duggal (2023) on the guru’s MSG feature films and the DSS’s wider “devotion of attractions.”

4. “rIndia” from the name of the Reddit discussion forum (r/India) in which the comment was made (see http://.reddit.com%2Fr%2Findia%2Fcomments%2F6w4fsn%2Fyou_and_i_created_the_dera_sacha_sauda_read_what%2F).

5. We continue to use the present tense, despite the DSS guru’s imprisonment. This is because it is far from clear that his story is over. As we write this in July 2022, the guru has been released on parole for a limited time. He was also released briefly earlier in 2022. These facts may not be unconnected to forthcoming Haryana state elections

6. *Mumbai Mirror*, October 14, 2015.

7. See, in particular, Copeman and Ikegame (2012) and Copeman, Duggal, and Longkumer (2023).

8. See Copeman (2009) on gurus and the surpassing of world records, and also Kim (2010).

9. Please see discussion in Copeman (2009).

10. From an official Dera Sacha Sauda website (<http://www.derasachasauda.in/index.html>), as consulted in 2008.

11. From an official Dera Sacha Sauda website (<http://www.derasachasauda.org>), as consulted in 2008.

12. Official DSS press release, PR Newswire, November 27, 2018.

13. *Times of India*, April 5, 2020. See Srinivas (2010) and Copeman (2009) on gurus and prophecies.

14. From an official Dera Sacha Sauda website (<https://www.saintdrmsginsan.me/degree-of-doctorate/#:~:text=On%20the%20auspicious%20occasion%20of,Ram%20Rahim%20Singh%20Ji%20Insan>), as consulted in April 2021. Not much public information is available concerning the World Records University. Its website (<https://worldrecordsuniversity.co.uk>), consulted in April 2021, described it as “an autonomous university formed by the conglomeration of Record Books around the World. Its associates include Asia Book of Records, Vietnam Book of Records, Indo-China Book of Records, India Book of Records, Nepal Book of Records, World Records Union, World Creativity Science Academy, and Indo-Vietnam Medical Board. World Records University is the only university offering an honorary Doctorate to Record Holder’s / breaker’s Community. The degree is awarded to those who have demonstrated an Honoris Causa, or cause to be honored. This program is offered only to a select group of highly accomplished individuals specially who have made a world or a national record.”

15. Clean India Mission: Modi launched the mission on Mahatma Gandhi’s birth anniversary (October 2) in 2014 to promote cleanliness and hygiene with a particular emphasis on ending open defecation.

16. The DSS guru's fourth film, *Hind ka Napak Ko Jawab: MSG Lion Heart 2*, was released in February 2017. It starred the guru as the main protagonist, Sher-e-Hind, with a plot based on the real-life Uri attack, committed in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir in September 2016, reportedly by armed terrorists supported by Pakistan. India retaliated with a much-debated surgical strike across the Line of Control in Pakistani-administered Kashmir. Subverting *Pakistan* (land of the pure) by naming it *Napak* (unholy or unhallowed), the film depicts India and Pakistan in binary terms of good versus evil. Fittingly, the guru's grand entry atop a tank was also an event meant for launching the film's trailer. One of the loudspeaker wonder prompts ran: "*Hind ka Napak ko Jawab dene ke liye taiyar hai Sher-e-Hind*" (Lion of India is ready to reply back to evil/unholy forces).

17. It is not only caste leaders, but also gurus, who are vital "container actors" at election time (Ikegame [2012] has shown that the categories of guru and caste leader are perfectly capable of collapsing into one). Gold (2012) refers to the Indian media's coinage of the term "Ballot babas" to describe the phenomenon, the assumption being that the recruitment by political parties of consummate "inclusive singularities" constitutes simultaneously the recruitment of those whom they contain (their followers) (see also Chatterjee [2004, 50] on the state's engagement with governed populations through their "natural leaders").

18. Though eventually prosecuted, there had seemed to be impunity, with charges of rape and murder in legal paralysis for decades.

19. Comments on the YouTube video "Saint Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Ji Insaan—Love Charger" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q48tagwurUw>).

20. Comments on the YouTube video "Guru Da Pattar, MSG Cover Melodies" ([Youtube.com/watch?v=xB_LiG-yOfE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xB_LiG-yOfE)).

21. Official DSS press release, PR Newswire, November 27, 2018.

22. Official DSS press release, PR Newswire, May 2, 2019.

23. See Copeman and Ikegame (2012).

24. The section heading—also on exaggeration—is a borrowing from Sloterdijk (2013).

25. That is to say, interaction and crossing over between different media forms.

26. See Copeman and Ikegame (2012).

27. See Copeman and Duggal (2023) on use of cinematic dubbing in the guru's MSG movies to reach hitherto inaccessible audiences and so further "scale up" the movement.

28. Quotation from the article "Celebration of 101st Wonder Diamond Jubilee Masto Mast Ruhani Ru-B-Ru Nights," published on an official Dera Sacha Sauda website (<https://www.derasachasauda.org/celebration-of-101st-wonder-diamond-jubilee-masto-mast-ruhani-ru-b-ru-nights/>), as consulted in April 2021.

29. Quotation from the article "101st Blast Kohinoor Diamond Jubilee" published on an official Dera Sacha Sauda website (<https://www.sachishiksha.in/101st-blast-101st-kohinoor-diamond-jubilee/>), as consulted in April 2021.

30. Quotation from the article “101st Blast Kohinoor Diamond Jubilee” published on an official Dera Sacha Sauda website (<https://www.sachishiksha.in/101st-blast-101st-kohinoor-diamond-jubilee/>), as consulted in April 2021.

31. See images accompanying the article “Thousands Swayed at The 101st Wonder Kohinoor Diamond Jubilee Masto Mast Ruhani Rubru Night,” published on an official Dera Sacha Sauda website (<https://www.derasachasauda.org/thousands-swayed-at-the-101st-wonder-kohinoor-diamond-jubilee-masto-mast-ruhani-rubru-night/>), as consulted in April 2021.

32. Such terms for defining the uniqueness of the guru’s attire are found in the DSS publication *Sachi Shiksha*, June 10, 2014.

33. An extremely popular Punjabi rapper and singer, Yo Yo Honey Singh has gained notoriety for offensive lyrics that glorify violence and misogyny.

34. See Copeman and Banerjee (2019, ch. 6).

35. The DSS guru responded by claiming that his attire was inspired not by the iconography of Guru Gobind Singh but rather by that of the Mughal tradition (see Duggal 2022).

36. See the YouTube video “sacha sauda 1” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXnLjBGf5SI>).

37. Comments on the YouTube video “Saint Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Ji Insan—Love Charger” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q48tagwurUw>).

38. Copeman (2015).

39. See Copeman and Ikegame (2012).

40. Copeman and Ikegame (2012, 307).

41. See Copeman and Ikegame (2012, 325); further, in our work on the DSS guru’s feature films we discuss an unsuccessful series of visits by the DSS guru, outside of his north Indian stomping ground, to Kerala (Copeman and Duggal 2023).

42. See Copeman, Duggal, and Longkumer (2023).

43. Comments on the YouTube videos “Saint Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Ji Insan—Love Charger” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q48tagwurUw>) and “Never Ever (Remix)—Full Video Song—MSG” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IN5YXmIz2QI>).

44. Comment on the YouTube video “Saint Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Ji Insan—Love Charger” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q48tagwurUw>).

45. Quotation from the homepage of an official Dera Sacha Sauda website (<https://www.saintdrmsginsan.me/>), as consulted in April 2021.

46. Comments on the YouTube videos “Saint Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Ji Insan—Love Charger” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q48tagwurUw>) and “Never Ever (Remix)—Full Video Song—MSG” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IN5YXmIz2QI>).

47. Web source consulted in April 2021, which no longer exists (<http://www.pattern-recognition.se/blog.php>).

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