

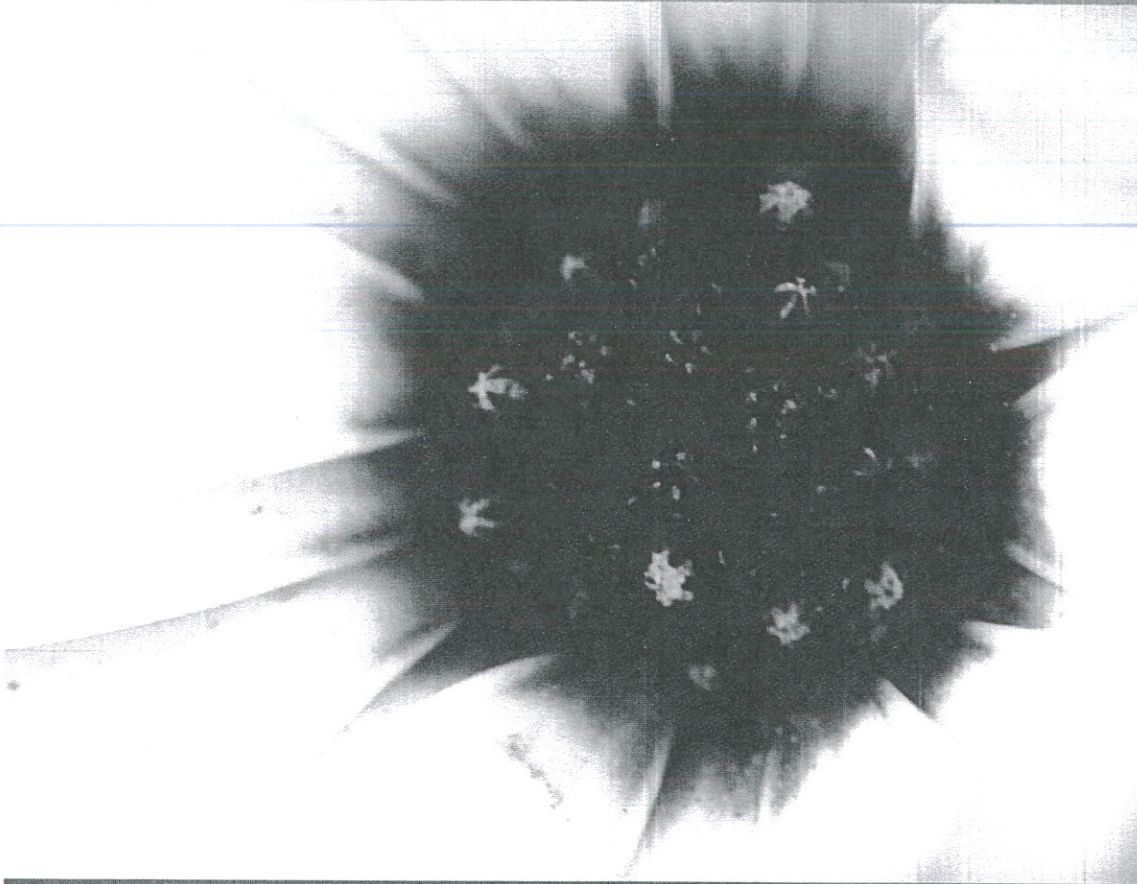


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The Guru in South Asia

New Interdisciplinary Perspectives

**Edited by Jacob Copeman
and Aya Ikegame**



ROUTLEDGE



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5 The gay guru

Fallibility, unworldliness, and the scene of instruction

Lawrence Cohen

Into the woods

G. says: 'You know, Guruji is also in this line. . . .'

This essay begins in a long-ago moment of conversation that demands some context. A friend from Banaras, call him G., is talking to me. It is 1993: a different world. My attention has drifted to something else, a magazine article I have been reading on an emerging 'gay group' in Delhi. G. and I are both in Delhi at the time – I have a meeting with my academic advisor at the University of Delhi – and I am thinking about a recent visit we both made to the gay group in question.

The group meets at a coffee house in the city center, and identifies itself discreetly by a red rose placed on the table. G. still finds the idea of a gay group mildly preposterous. In Banaras, he and his friends used to go in groups to cruise (*ghumna*) for men in the city's parks: going with friends used to be enjoyable, and it was a way to defend against the 'gunda types', guys that is who would threaten violence unless you paid up after fooling around (Cohen 1995b). But increasingly, G. says family matters and their accompanying worries (*chinta*) and pressure weigh upon him. Park friendships are slipping away.

Back in the enjoyable days I had several times asked G. what commonality linked park friends. You might say I was queuing behind all the other researchers in the late 1980s moving across the world's economic margins in search of 'men who have sex with men' to interview in the name of AIDS prevention. The name of the game at that point was the discovery of alternate categories for sex, relationship, and community, categories that presumptively would allow the emerging welfare assemblage of non-government organizations (NGOs), identity-based organizations, and state agencies to craft more meaningful information to modify risky behavior (Cohen 2005). Perhaps I too was searching for a word.

G., in 1989 pressed to play the game, at times responded: *sab is line mein hain*, they are all 'in this line'. To be in this line, as a young man, was to find oneself unexpectedly enjoying other young men, encounters mediated through a sexual look [*nazar lagana*] and touch [G. had myriad ways of describing the park touch, challenging the banality of my hoping for the right word: he would often summarize these with the untranslatable phrase *log yuyu karte hain*]. So for G. to tell me that his sometime advisor and counselor Guruji was also in this line was

seemingly to place him within a similar circuit of the visual and haptic. But -- and this point should be underscored -- for G. to link together the guru and the gay was in some measure a response to a world in which auditors like myself were an emerging and ever more ubiquitous presence. By the early 2000s the ground would shift. G., like the park friends with whom he used to go around, would then be as likely to use the word *gay*, whether or not there was a researcher present. But this newer, more stable referent of the gay would not link to the guru in quite the same way.

But we are in 1993. The last time G. had accompanied me to the red rose table at the coffee house, days before this conversation, we had met two other men. One lived in Delhi and the other was an out-of-towner like ourselves, in his case from Chandigarh and then graduate school in New York. Our conversation had focused on a form with global pretensions (Altman 2001), the coming-out story. The conversation had been in English, and G. did not speak much. Back in 1993 and in Delhi, 'gay' often implied a particular class -- people unlike G. with access to fluent English -- and a particular practice: talking about yourself with strangers. If G. (no less a cosmopolitan in his own city) easily moved among and between most of the groups in the Banaras parks, in this particular Delhi scene he had had little place and little incitement to speak. All you did, he had challenged me afterward, was to jabber (*bakbak*) about *being gay*. What, I remember him having asked me, is the point?

But on this day I am compelled by the beauty of the rose and do not want, research or not, to have another such conversation about gay as *bakbak*. I bury myself in the magazine. I am not certain whether G.'s mocking of the Delhi red rose scene lies mostly in its foreignness: a group seemingly defined more by stranger sociability than by the trust, as in Banaras, of park friends allowing one to encounter park strangers safely. Or perhaps, given how G.'s experience of park scenes in either city was changing in the face of family pressures, I presume that what was at stake for him in the red rose scene was its elitism, its dissonant relation to his more recent and sometimes overwhelming experience of pressure and *chinta*. These men, English-speaking and world-traveling, could not be bearing the worries he has. If park friendships grow thin and stretched in time, as each friend in this line has his own familial pressure to bear, the Delhi men appear to G. to occupy a world unaccountably outside of the worried life. My own presumption -- the vulgarity by which I seem able to introduce a sociological gaze into the confused affects of friendship -- does not go unnoticed by either of us. But what seems most at stake at this moment is an imminent death.

Before G. invokes his Guruji, he has been talking about his brother's two-wheeler accident, a serious head injury leaving him bed-ridden, uncommunicative, and 'cracked'. This conversation is a familiar one between us: I had earlier been angry because G. did not want to bring his brother to a doctor I knew. We both had a sense this brother was dying. G. decided, as I seemed suspicious of Guruji's treatment, to take me to meet him. We went to Guruji's home: his wife and some other young men were there. Guruji looked me over, examined my palms and my manner, and gave me an amulet to wear and some advice: a daily discipline or *niyam*.¹

G. has talked about Guruji a lot in reference to his brother's condition and other sources of worry. This day I am not listening; as I remember it I am still frustrated that G. will not take his brother to the neurologist. I immerse myself in the article on the new gay groups, ignoring him. And then, the hook, from G., bringing it all together: 'You know, Guruji is also in this line. . . .'

Instructing the worried life

Now he has caught me. Years later, this essay is one response.

G. has heard me do interviews with the old people, and also with men in the parks. He knows what I look and sound like when I think I am doing anthropology. I begin to look and sound anthropological now. What do you mean, I say, that Guruji is in this line? He is married -- I have met his wife.

My question is not really worth answering: as if many of the men we know in this line in Banaras are not also married. But G. says, to make a point that should have been obvious from our visits to Guruji (didn't I see his use of magical *mantra-tantra*, the sexual innuendo lacing his comments to me, and his easy deployment both of Sanskrit and of low-status, Hindu and Muslim forms of assessment and discipline): 'he is a *tantrik*.' What force this teacher and advisor has, what makes him compelling as a guide through life's troubles, is bound up somehow to practices that trouble propriety and easy boundaries.

Some years even earlier, in the late 1980s, I had worked in a Dalit slum where many men and women had cultivated relations with gurus they often called exorcists (*ojhas*) or *tantriks*. I spent a year visiting one of the exorcist-*tantriks*, sitting in on nightly sessions where he would become possessed by the goddess and engage the ghostly presences possessing the children or women who were brought to his home. He gave me manuals of magic, *mantra-tantra* and *asli indrajai*, full of spells to bring down an enemy and capture the heart of a beloved. He had been introduced to me by an acquaintance as that man's guru, and my time with him was structured by my own sense of what a teacher was. I asked him to 'teach' me *mantra-tantra*, and he responded by offering me books to read, a sort of public *tantra*, pamphlets of incantations one could find at bus stand and train book stalls and sometimes near temples, *dargahs*, and fairs. But most of the men I knew that claimed the *ojha* as a guru were not interested in becoming some kind of *tantrik* themselves. They sat in on the possessions and the nightly contest of wills unfolding between the exorcist and the afflicted, but their conversations with him happened at other times. As in Guruji's home, these talks indirectly engaged the everyday afflictions of worry and things one might do and avoid and wear to protect oneself.

At the point G. tells me Guruji is 'in this line', I have been hearing about Guruji for some months. G. has been particularly afflicted by the great, indebted expenses in his life. Within a short period of time, his eldest brother returned from years away with a pregnant wife and soon after got into the accident rendering him cracked; his eldest and beloved sister was hospitalized with stomach pains and died; a second brother was diagnosed with heart disease and G. was told an

expensive operation was necessary; and their father grew himself cracked from all this chinta and could no longer work, placing all the family's burdens on G.

Chinta: from a small store near his house, G. now buys *gutka*, the pleasurable, carcinogenic mixture of betel nut, tobacco, and spices, and constantly chews it. When I insist, after meals where I seem to eat three times as much as G., on reminding him that *gutka* causes cancer, G. tells me that it relieves the worries. A doctor he knows has given G. pills for the worries: they are benzodiazepines, anti-anxiety medication. G. takes what appears a high dose. And G. visits Guruji once a month or so: he brings varied things Guruji has asked for, and reports on the progress of various errands he has done for Guruji with the bureaucracy or local fixers or in various markets. Guruji suggests or modifies a particular *niyam* for G.'s constant worries.

G.'s *niyam* varies: I am not paying sufficient attention to it. Around that time, it seems to center on G. going in Banaras early each morning to the Ganga, the Ganges River, taking chapatti dough that his sister had prepared to feed the fish, bit by bit.

How might Guruji, even inattentively engaged, inflect thinking about the guru and the relevance of his or her sexual difference to the possibility of a progressive relation, whether (1) pedagogic, (2) therapeutic, or (3) devotional? For G. in those years, these three inflections of becoming and of getting by were bound together. To term them 'progressive' may demand a philosophical dualism and betray the explicitly Vedantic and monist teaching of at least some of the gurus I will discuss. By the term I mean that the relation to the guru or teacher as it emerged in a set of Banaras conversations, including mine with Guruji and with G., was marked by a persistent focus on a self-formation through practice that could come to distinguish chinta – the worried life – from something else. In the case of Guruji, this something else was tied to the promise of the tantrik.

G.'s relation with Guruji was not intensely devotional. Being a tantrik did not mean that Guruji's habit of trying *yuyu karna* – fondling – some of his disciples was always appreciated. G. sometimes doubted whether Guruji was able to relieve much chinta. In a very different context, describing why he avoided the Bengali Quarter in Banaras in which I used to live, G. once told me: they [Bengalis] practice tantra in their temples, it is not safe there. But the dangers and errors of tantra in itself, as with the excesses and gaps within Guruji's practice, were not a pressing invalidation of the *niyam* or of the man. What seemed at stake in G.'s attachment to Guruji and to the discipline, the *niyam*, he offered was not a kind of person or even a kind of relation but a kind of event, a return amid the persistence of worries to what we could term a scene of instruction.

By tantra and the tantrik, I am neither necessarily referring to a consistent body of knowledge and practice nor its dominant modern forms (for the latter, see Urban 2001, 2003, White 2000).² 'Tantra' here, both for G. and for many people in the Dalit shum in Nagwa mentioned earlier, refers to a wide range of practices – possibly involving the gender and propriety-crossing work of the exorcist, or possibly the troubling of sexual or gustatory norms by the advisor or teacher as these might inform qualities of an adult's long-term relation with him or her.

Tantra might on occasion stand for the ethnically different and dangerous, as did G.'s estimation of the Bengali Quarter, but it primarily marked the possibilities and limits of advice and self-transformation on the social margins in that time.

If the *ojha* who gave me books of spells referenced one register of a public tantra, available in book stalls at particular, often liminal places, a second and popular register appeared in Banaras, in both Hindi and English, in popular 'sexology' and 'crime' magazines over the 1990s and since (Srivastava 2007). 'Tantriks' were staples of these genres: familiar male figures of criminality and lustful excess that attracted the credulous and betrayed their trust. In the discourse of the corrupt tantrik, a limit to the possibility of living outside of worry is rehearsed.

There were varied ways G. might discuss the limit to his guru's ability to relieve chinta. In my presence, the difference between G. and myself tended to predominate, especially in moments as that following the Delhi gay group meeting when that difference rendered itself acute. The bakbak of the gay, particularly in the privileged voice of English that seemed to him to inoculate itself against the worried life, pointed toward the palpable maldistribution of chinta in the world system, against which even a local tantrik and Guruji might only achieve so much.

This essay marks a first pass at thinking about the guru in the wake of G.'s provocation, too long ignored. It moves across different gurus, and kinds of gurus, not to make a claim that these are all minor variations on a single cultural or historical type. Nor, given that I am not attempting a genealogical inquiry, do I hold up the guru as an ideal type in the understanding of an emergent historical situation. The species of inquiry undertaken here might best be described as a sort of 'as if' procedure. If we were to assume the impossible coherence of a concept – the guru – over time, what might we learn about practices like advising, teaching, healing, or devotion amid our problems, and the problems of those, through vehicles like anthropology, for whom we come to care? What might we learn, in other words, if we could take 'the guru' *as if* it were both a stable and a meaningful concept across a range of disparate situations and fractured and shifting universes of discourse? Such as if procedures, I will suggest, may themselves be familiar components of scenes of instruction. One comes to honor the guru – one comes, indeed, to love him or her as a devotee – by holding simultaneously to the guru as a necessarily failed *and* powerfully idealized and perfected advisor, teacher, giver of *niyam*.

The guru, as I will treat it, is on the one hand a critical site of transformation, privilege, and perhaps danger – marginal, excessive, doting, punishing, brilliant, and *burdened* – and on the other an idealized, perfected form or copy or consolidation of a range of specific and all-too-human forms of instruction: and this doubled guru makes me think of the ancient story of Ekalavya, to which I turn.

Ekalavya (1)

What is it to have a relation in time to a scene of instruction, to a guru? We might begin by asking an opposed question: what is it to be denied this scene?

Here I am mindful of the resonant account, from the Mahabharata, of Ekalavya (*Adi Parva: Sambhava* 134). Ekalavya is refused the legitimacy of studying under the greatest teacher of his age: he responds by retreating into the forest and creating an image or copy of the teacher, toward which he directs his discipline and respect.

We might begin by reviewing the story and some of its recent glosses.

Ekalavya is a prince of the low-status Nishada (in colonial and subsequent parlance, his inferior status is rendered as 'tribal'). Like many an aspiring youth of his time, he hopes to be taught by the renowned archer and teacher Drona. Ekalavya journeys to Hastinapura to join the boys learning the great martial art of archery from Drona. Hastinapura is the Kuru capital: Drona has been appointed teacher of the royal Pandava and Kaurava cousins residing there whose future war with each other will be at the center of the great epic. The cousins are all Ksatriyas, warriors: among them Drona includes his own son Aswatthaman in the lessons. Aswatthaman and his father are Brahmins: somewhat incongruous figures in this martial scene of instruction. But placing a high-status Brahmin student, of the same household and relative status as his father and teacher, among this group of powerful Ksatriyas is one thing. Teaching a lowly Nishada, prince of his people or not, turns out to be another.

Drona is particularly sensitive to status. Growing up a poor Brahmin in the Ksatriya-dominated world of the text has presented its challenges to him. When Aswatthaman was born, Drona's martial and ascetic discipline was not enough to feed the young boy: he needed a patron and so sought out his old friend Drupada, now king of Panchala. The first version of the Ekalavya story I encountered, as a student long ago, was the late nineteenth-century translation by K. M. Ganguli: here is Ganguli's version of Drona himself recounting what happened to make him decide to seek out Drupada and offer his skills as a teacher. In the words of the guru:

And it so happened that one day the child Aswatthaman observing some rich men's sons drink milk, began to cry. At this I was so beside myself that I lost all knowledge of the point of the compass. . . . I was desirous of obtaining a cow . . . after I had come back unsuccessful, some of my son's playmates gave him water mixed with powdered rice. Drinking this, the poor boy, was deceived into the belief that he had taken milk, and began to dance in joy, saying, 'O, I have taken milk. I have taken milk!' Beholding him dance with joy amid these playmates smiling at his simplicity, I was exceedingly touched. (Mahabharata 1: 133 from Ganguli 1883-1896: vol. I: 277)

Drona the father has failed as a milk giver. His wife Kripa is absent from this section of the narrative: presumably, the story follows the weaning of Aswatthaman as a shift from the milk-giving of a mother (the breast-giver) to that of a father (the householder and possessor of milch-cows). Others mock the boy and mock his father for letting the child subsist on this facsimile of milk.

Drona, desperate and humiliated, decides to take up a youthful offer of support from his erstwhile classmate Drupada, made years earlier when they both were

training under their mutual guru Agnivesa. But further humiliation for the Brahmin ensues when the king plays grown-up Hal to Drona's Falstaff. Drupada refuses the claim of their boyhood friendship, made within the intimacy of the *gurukul* (the domain or extended household of their guru). The young man's ignoring of wealth and status is unbecoming to Drupada's adult duties as a king.

Drona wants redress, and journeys to the court of Hastinapura, where he is made welcome: he becomes a guru and a proper householder. Drona asks his new students the royal cousins for an unnamed gift once they achieve the skills he will be teaching them – we presume he will ask for some revenge against Drupada. Of the princes, only the future hero Arjuna offers to give whatever is asked of him. The relation of this teacher and this student is now marked off against all others by the totality of this future gift. The guru is both exemplary of skill and burdened, in this case by humiliation. The beloved student is that one who will give up everything to the guru. Drona in turn promises that Arjuna will be the greatest archer of their age.³

This exchange of exemplary gifts and totalizing commitment is threatened by the promiscuous situation of teaching: there is always another student who may yet be more promising. Drona's burden and its resolution in the promises of world-mastery he makes to Arjuna and also, if implicitly, to his own son Aswatthaman, must be protected by restricting the *gurukul* and managing the distribution of lessons within it. The challenge is not only outsiders like Ekalavya. Given the humiliation by Ksatriyas that drives him, Drona resorts to anxious tricks to ensure that Aswatthaman receives extra training to exceed the young Ksatriya princes. Most of the princes are deceived. Arjuna, however, sees through these tricks and is able to demand the same additional training. Within the *gurukul*, both the actual child and the student who will give everything are set apart, protected, from the rest.

Initially, Ekalavya is easily managed. Drona does not need to resort to deceptions: within the moral world of Hastinapura and its surroundings, Nishada princes cannot reside with Ksatriyas and Brahmins. Ekalavya is sent away. There is no voice in the text proclaiming this rejection as an ironic repetition of Drona's own humiliation. In some modern renderings of the epic for children, such a teacher is troubling. Arjuna is the one to refuse the Nishada boy and to implore Drona to send him away.⁴

We are not offered Ekalavya's thoughts upon this rejection. The boy retreats to a place it has become conventional to term the forest. K.M. Ganguli writes that

the Nishada prince, touching Drona's feet with bent head, wended his way into the forest, and there he made a clay-image of Drona, and began to worship it respectfully, as if it was his real preceptor, and practiced weapons before it with the most rigid regularity. In consequence of his exceptional reverence for his preceptor and his devotion to his purpose, all the three processes of fixing arrows on the bowstring, aiming, and letting off became very easy for him.

(Mahabharata 1: 134, from Ganguli 1883-1896: vol. I, 280)

If in Drona's gurukul, the best students must see through an older man's subterfuges to gain access to all that he has to teach them, in this lonely part of the forest Drona offers nothing and yet everything to his earnest disciple.

The story of Ekalavya concludes with a different exemplar of the total gift to the guru, the *guru-dakshina*, than that which will be demanded of Arjuna. The gurukul princes and Drona are wandering close to where Ekalavya practices. A dog accompanying their servant finds Ekalavya first and starts barking, interrupting his practice. Shooting a volley of arrows, Ekalavya sutures the creature's mouth shut but does not kill it. The dog returns to the gurukul who recognize in its transformation a marvel of archery, and seek out the source.

And beholding that man of grim visage, who was totally a stranger to them, they asked, 'Who art thou and whose son?' Thus questioned, the man replied, 'Ye heroes, I am the son of Hiranyadhanu, king of the Nishadas. Know me also for a pupil of Drona, laboring for the mastery of the art of arms.'

Despite his earlier efforts to limit the *gurukul*, Drona sees in Ekalavya's skill a threat to his promise to Arjuna and to alleviation of his own burden. His response has vexed many modern readers. Ganguli offers this version:

When Ekalavya saw Drona approaching towards him, he went a few steps forward, and touched his feet and prostrated himself on the ground. And the son of the Nishada king worshipping Drona, duly represented himself as his pupil, and clasping his hands in reverence stood before him (awaiting his commands). Then Drona, O king, addressed Ekalavya, saying, 'If, O hero, thou art really my pupil, give me then my fees.' On hearing these words, Ekalavya was very much gratified, and said in reply, 'O illustrious preceptor, what shall I give? Command me; for there is nothing, O foremost of all persons conversant with the *Vedas*, that I may not give unto my preceptor.' Drona answered, 'O Ekalavya, if thou art really intent on making me a gift, I should like then to have the thumb of thy right hand.'

The brutal condition for Ekalavya's recognition by his guru-made-flesh destroys his own future of mastery.

Hearing these cruel words of Drona, who had asked of him his thumb as tuition-fee, Ekalavya, ever devoted to truth and desirous also of keeping his promise, with a cheerful face and an unafflicted heart cut off without ado his thumb, and gave it unto Drona. After this, when the Nishada prince began once more to shoot with the help of his remaining fingers, he found, O king, that he had lost his former lightness of hand. And at this Arjuna became happy.

(Mahabharata 1: 134, from Ganguli 1883–1896, vol. I, 281)

The guru of the margin

A second provocation for this essay was offered me by Jacob Copeman, in his asking me to think about the vexed relation of several modern Hindu gurus to the accusation and promise of homosexuality. With the Delhi High Court's 2009 striking down of the Indian Penal Code's Section 377 prohibiting carnal intercourse against the order of nature, one of the most prominent critics of the court and defender of the former law has been the television guru, yoga master, and political activist Baba Ramdev. Ramdev is an important, intriguing figure for thinking about emerging intersections of gender and sex, politics, publicity, and the disciplined body. In 2011, his primary public political interventions shifted from fighting the decriminalization of homosexual sex to joining other prominent figures across the political spectrum in India calling for an independent commission to guarantee a check on state corruption. Ramdev organized a large protest in Delhi, despite lacking the requisite permits for such a large gathering: the Congress Party-led government (most attacks on corruption in this period have additionally been attacks on Congress rule) aggressively cracked down on the event. Seeking to evade the violence faced by his followers, Ramdev disguised himself in women's clothes but was apprehended so cross-dressed.

Ramdev's challenge is to homosexuality as a particular kind of promise emergent with late twentieth-century Indian neoliberalism and its global milieu. By 'promise', I want to underscore three themes that were frequently repeated within the English-language, relatively elite, and NGO [non-governmental organization]-dominated network assembled in opposition to Section 377. This network was comprised largely of varied, activist, rights-based, and public health constituencies that have come into place with the global spread of AIDS, the withering of the development state, and the consolidation of welfare capital through powerful funders like the Gates Foundation. The themes, each both a presumptive cause and effect of state tolerance of the human relations criminalized under 377, could be summarized as (1) a politics of rights, (2) a rationality of public health, and (3) a culture of secular modernity. To the extent that opposing 377 was legible as this protective triad of liberal governance, varied challenges to the 'un-Indian' situation produced by decriminalizing homosexuality and its allied carnal relations were legible to the network as dangerously illiberal and anti-modern.

Homosexuality has also emerged as accusation in proximity to the modern figure of the guru, perhaps most painfully in relation to the American historian of religion Jeffery Kripal's work analyzing the ecstatic experience and biography of the late nineteenth-century Bengali mystic Sri Ramakrishna. Kripal extended to modern Hindu mysticism a theory he had begun to formulate within his own United States based training within a Christian monastic order: that there was a close and interreligious linkage between same-sex eroticism and the apperception of the divine within mystical experience. Kripal's method focused on a close reading of Bengali-language descriptions of Ramakrishna's discussions set down by his devotees against the severe bowdlerization of these in their English-language rendering.

I term both the form of Kripal's argument and the critical, often quite wounded responses to it as twinned sites of *accusation* neither to accede to Kripal's many critics nor to defend his text against these. To extend the more cogent of the critiques beyond their sometimes troubled presumption of his intention, Kripal's argument in *its form* reprises, if in modern liberal parlance, the colonial project of reading Indian religiosity as perverse. At the least, *Kali's Child* is spectacularly inattentive to the historical formation of effeminate and homosexual accusation (and self-accusation) in the late colonial period and subsequently (Nandy 1983, Cohen 1995a, Sinha 1995, Luhrmann 1996, Vanita 2009). The tragedy is that Kripal's analyses are often spectacularly insightful in attending to the poetics of ecstatic experience, but the denunciatory field in which they locate themselves may render them illegible to a self-respecting public.

The term that I have encountered specifying the unusual quality of their guru, among devotees of Sri Ramakrishna both in West Bengal and abroad, is that of his 'unworldliness'. For many of his devotees, Ramakrishna's intimate sexual and gender play marks his transgressive status as a powerful *and unworldly* figure, placing him more in the premarital place of the innocent child than that of the sexually transgressive adult. The frame of unworldliness is familiar to varied Hindu devotional literatures. I think of a rendering of a story from the Padma Purana in the devotional Hindi-language publication *Kalyan* detailing the 'alaukik prem', the unworldly love, of the deities Shiva and Vishnu ('*Shiv-vishnuka alaukik prem*' 1993). The gods arrive to remedy a series of bloody events that occur when two groups of students of renowned sages accuse each other of dishonoring their respective sectarian commitments to guru and to God, leading to violence and many deaths. Having resurrected the fallen combatants of both gurukuls, the gods repair to a sylvan glen where they lie down together and rest and then engage in spirited horseplay with each other in a pond. This series of images invokes the spectacle of a love that stands in powerful distinction to the expected comportment of adult relationship, but the physical intimacy elaborated between the two gods – playfully wrestling and splashing one another and lying together in comfortable repose – suggests less the figure of normative adult desire or its deviation than the homosocial attachments of youth. If the burden of being a young disciple in the Ekalavya episode is to learn to bear the adult desires of the guru – there the weight of Drona's humiliation and painful need for restitution – here the gods address the limit of that burden by reprising a different form of youthful attachment.

If some of the accusations and counter-accusations that emerge in the wake of the publication of *Kali's Child* often come across as highly personalized, they are nonetheless examples of a common condition of what I have elsewhere termed ethical publicity (Cohen 2010), that is the coming to know one's habitation of a local moral world through the mass mediated experience of participating in and as a wounded public. If taking offense becomes a common condition for the organization of mass publics, media gurus like Baba Ramdev may be seen as literally teaching the experience of offense in the formation of an ethical public.⁵ As such, the unworldly love of the *Padma Purana* as taught by the editors of the Gita Press

who produce *Kalyan* offers a contrastive teaching, one that I would want in my own idiom to claim as queer. Such queerness does not presume an explicitly sexual content but imagines a form of pedagogic correction not organized around the imposition of adult burden, that painful reality of facing the future that G. called *chinta* or pressure. But such a claim may not be possible.

G., at least the G. of those Delhi conversations now long ago, might laugh at the presumption that pressure could be so easily alleviated through a contrastive ethic of non-futurity or a particular gloss on the Padma Purana. *Chinta* was a trenchant condition of marginal life, intensified in the assuming of adult burden. And yet what Guruji the neighborhood tantrik tried to give him was precisely a way to live in a different relation to those adult burdens. Here the question of the tantrik's multiple transgressions – embodied for G. in the older man's groping and dirty talk with young people – may or may not offer a critical context for his gift of a discipline or *niyam* to relieve this affectively organized generational frame.

What is more clear is that Guruji, as G. talked about him, did not appear as a figure who needed to be protected from accusation. Like the object of devotion, Guruji marked himself against the usual norms of adult and husbandly propriety. But his acting against age-specific norms, in familiar speech and groping of the younger men who came to him for the relief of a burdensome adulthood, did not place him in a condition of unworldly innocence that must be defended against latter-day claims of sexual deviance. The innocent godman in Kolkata might playfully address, in language, gaze, and touch, the *Geworfenheit*, the thrownness, of his devotees. In a different age, this play risks accusation as it is subject to new procedures of truth. But Guruji's own serious play does not risk accusation. Rather, it demands accusation. The possibility of Guruji's *niyam* not being a failure may depend on his coherence as a tantrik.

And in proximity to me, and the English magazines and red roses and men from everywhere, this coherence may in a certain moment find itself in hesitant extension: Guruji, beyond the world of categories that informs risk, may nonetheless find himself in a 'line': this line.

Ekalavya (2)

The two Dronas – on the one hand, the brilliant but burdened man who demands everything, offering recognition through a radical act of giving by the disciple that may lead to triumph [Arjuna] or utter failure [Ekalavya], and on the other the idealized Drona that unflinchingly guides Ekalavya through his solitary labors – frame for me a figure of the guru that begins to instruct me how to pay attention to Guruji in Banaras as well as to some of the stakes as varied scenes of instruction encounter the promise and accusation of contemporary homosexuality. What I have been suggesting is that the particular figure of the marginal, bad-behaving tantrik that G. offers in his adoption of Guruji's *niyam* may not depend on the separation of an idealized guru and the all-too-human subject of desire. Kripal, in offering a theory of ecstatic mystical experience rooted in the sexual object specificity of desire, could be taken to be doing something similar: to argue for the value

of a scene of instruction not separated from the burden of adult desire. But whether through or against intention, this particular collapse of the guru's doubleness cannot evade giving and receiving accusation.

Ekalavya's relation to Drona has been taken by at least one contemporary scholar as a metaphor for the predicament of the modern Indian intellectual, who fashions his or her own version of the idealized (Western) teacher he or she may not have full access to, achieves proficiency, and pays the unexpected cost, like Ekalavya's thumb (Shankar 1994). The rhetoric effectiveness of such an analogy depends on distinguishing the two Dronas through a binary of authentic versus inauthentic scenes of instruction.

My reading has been to approach the duality of Arjuna and Ekalavya, and of their respective Dronas, not as a cautionary tale regarding historically specific (here, racialized and neo-colonial) scenes of instruction. Rather, I collapse the two young men and their distinct fates into a single account of the challenge for the student, the afflicted, or the devotee to establish a relation with both the Dronas. Or reversing the frame, the actions of the guru in establishing a scene of instruction may involve both a gift exchange in the face of adult burdens and a form of idealization in which the guru becomes a copy free of the same.

How might a disciple address the challenge of this duality to the scene of instruction? G. identifies Guruji as a tantrik whose behavior both secures and troubles the possibility of alleviating worries and cares. I have suggested that such scenes might register as 'queer' to the extent that they resist both the mandate of a promised progression and the wound of a hurtful accusation. The point is not to rescue the guru from Baba Ramdev and others through the incantatory mantratantra of queer utopianism as much as it may be to trouble both the liberal promise and the painful accusation of 'the gay' in contemporary India through the doubled figure of the guru.

The drag of the guru

P. was ousted from many in his gay circle of friends in Mumbai; a charismatic businessman, AIDS activist, and drag performer, he would inevitably get drunk and then violent at big parties, creating unusually painful disruptions. When he moved away from Mumbai to join a different branch of the family business, some in this circle noted the move was at their behest: that P. needed to get away from the party scene to heal himself.

When some years later P. returned to Mumbai, he had become not only a devotee of a famous guru and teacher of yoga with a growing international following but also a teacher of his guru's meditation and somatic techniques. He described his flowing white robes to me as 'it's like being a drag queen again'. Might we take him seriously here?

Unlike Baba Ramdev, P.'s guru did not offer his teachings as a bulwark against homosexuality as a Western disease of desire, nor did he promise yoga as a cure for AIDS (Ramdev did). Like Ramdev, P.'s guru was immensely popular. But the range of his devotees tilted toward a more elite population. Ramdev spoke almost

entirely in Hindi whereas P.'s guru used English extensively. Ramdev's embodied healing addressed the national as well as the individual body. P.'s guru is attractive worldwide, not only among Indian emigrants. I have met many of his followers in California, where I live. A number of them are lesbian and gay, and their guru's philosophy and discipline may articulate with other spiritual disciplines and projects of community. Homosexuality is not as available as a figure of excess for P.'s guru as it is for Ramdev.

P. was sent away, according to his friends, precisely because his own earlier version of excess at gay functions and institutions was destructive both of local community and, in his ever more chaotic activism, of effective AIDS prevention. On the other hand, his excess as a drag queen and brilliant, charismatic presence was cherished and valued in its ability to break beyond both convention and selfishness in creating something like community. In a short 'gay' film P. was involved in making before his exile, two drag queens fight over a beautiful young man. The queens are exquisitely wounded creations, intertextually linked to multiple other globally dispersed sites of drag. At stake in debates over P.'s behavior in the years before he was banished was a question of how to read and to value what I am here terming excess.

His guru's teaching of yoga, for P., within a tiered structure of subordinate teachers to an extent resembling a multi-level marketing scheme, created a form and a discipline that seem, to use the language of some of his friends, to have healed his destructiveness. The guru did not counsel abstinence from pleasures but, rather like G.'s Guruji, a particular frame to manage life's assaults: here not *niyam* but a conception of 'art'. P. teaches this conception in workshops and on retreats. Art is a different matter than interdiction, and must be approached with a different range of affects than the teaching of renunciation and the prevention of excess. Art rethinks excess. The guru, P. says to me, is nothing but camp.

And along with the guru being 'drag' and 'camp,' he uses a third figure: *natak*, drama.

Back when he did AIDS work, P. wrote an essay for an international NGO and funder delineating excess as a public health problem. In it, he described *natak* as the unfolding of ever more intense affects amid not only gay parties but other sites of eroticized male homosociality, an unfolding that could lead to violence and that troubled the AIDS prevention focus on the adequacy of both the exercise of reason and the creation of community.

One contribution to the intensification of drama between men in Mumbai was for P. the partial bridging of class among men who have sex with men. G.'s encounters with the elite gay world in Delhi were of a much more stratified world in which men like him from small towns circulated as sex workers but were less entangled in the affective dramas of the middle-class queens. I am cautious at such generalizations: in any event, they are not mine but circulated at various times as differences ascribed to these two urban milieus. In any event, if for G. pain and estrangement came from the worries of family and poverty, worries for which the pleasurable sociality of men in this line were less and less available as alternative sociality or respite, for P. both estrangement and healing lay in the possibilities of *natak*. His relation with his

guru, and his becoming a guru himself, offer a certain reworking of drama as what his guru terms *art*, the natak of drag as an artfully excessive scene of instruction as opposed to the natak of the crazy life he abandoned.⁶

P. might not have managed the journey back. His guru's art as it moves along the multi-level chain of devotees-turned-teachers often fails as a scene of instruction. A family friend of mine was hospitalized for a regimen of chemotherapy in Delhi, producing her own version of institutional natak when the nursing staff continued to miss the critical scheduling of treatments. A staff oncologist and disciple of P.'s guru counseled the patient that her anger and frustration were standing in the way of an improved prognosis, and counseled her taking on the discipline of the same guru's art of living. The invocation of the idealized guru amid repeated institutional failure produced a disjunction for this friend: 'All you know how to offer here is the art of dying!' Art, as available in the clinical setting, refused her incandescent natak in the name of life. The distinction between righteous anger as a claim for oneself and the crazy life P. abandoned may not be easy to parse, but perhaps this at its most successful is what P. attempts in framing the art of his own guru-ship as drama, drag, and camp.

Drona, to return to the Mahabharata, might in P.'s idiom display a dangerous excess of natak. Full of painful feelings of humiliation and a desperate need both for revenge and for protecting his Brahman lineage from any such future pain, he struggles to define the boundaries of the gurukul: Arjuna survives, Ekalavya does not. But perhaps we can reframe the figure of the paradigmatic disciple as simultaneously both young men, joined at the thumb, negotiating the destructive and extraordinary powers of the teacher's natak in remaking their world.

Notes

- 1 The scene of instruction between Guruji and myself, in the small room where he saw visitors, was not quite the inadvertent 'fiasco' that Veena Das (this volume) recounts as all but inevitable in her own movement across local moral worlds to be treated in the presence of the goddess and her priest. In my case, there were the expected pretensions and affects – the distrust of and desire for Guruji's truth – a footing visible across my face as something between piousness and a smirk.
- 2 What emerged, in the room, was very similar to what Das frames as the 'deciphering of desires'. Das' initial hope, and the source of fiasco, was that the goddess, through the priest, should be able to offer a diagnosis without Das having, as the devotee, to enunciate them. If I too wanted Guruji to decipher my own situation without my offering much, he nonetheless engaged me with a claim on the commensurability of 'this line' that had evidently brought me into G.'s world and thus his own.
- 3 See for example Das (this volume) on 'the linguistic and ritual intimacy between Hindus and Muslims, especially among amils [Muslim healers] and tantriks.'
- 4 Indeed, all the princes of the gurukul upon the completion of their training will be asked to fight Drupada. The Kaurava cousins bring an army but fail to conquer the king; Arjuna and his brothers, the Pandavas, manage to capture Drupada on their own and force him to give up part of his kingdom to Drona. Arjuna fulfills the promise of the pedagogic relation.
- 5 The epic, however, is not done with the triangular relation between Drona and Drupada as mediated by Arjuna. Drona, now that he can claim the equivalent status of a king, declares an end to his enmity. But Drupada now carries the burden of humiliation.

A king in this world (Drona and a few others excepted) is not a guru: Drupada cannot call upon his students to alter the future through the total gift of guru-dakshina. He can, however, call upon progeny. Like the guru, whose labors are directed toward the future through the crafting of extraordinarily skilled beings who can fulfill the demand of guru-dakshina, Drupada sets about to create a set of extraordinarily skilled children. He performs a sacrifice to the gods and gains both a son, Dhrishtadyumna, who will eventually kill Drona only to himself be killed in turn by Aswatthaman, Drona's son, and a daughter, Draupadi, who will marry not only Arjuna but his four brothers as well.

In effect, Drupada reworks the effects of the teacher through the action of the sacrifice, eclipsing the bonds of the gurukul by the bonds of (magical) kinship: a son to destroy the teacher and a daughter to marry the students. This reworking anticipates the great war between the Kaurava and Pandava cousins that will place Arjuna and his brothers in opposition to the kingdom of Hastinapura and thus to Drona. Arjuna's plight, recounted in the Bhagavad Gita, lies in finding himself set against both his guru and his kinsmen.

- 4 See for example the 'kids' fable' version of the story at http://www.kidsgen.com/fables_and_fairytales/indian_mythology_stories/eklavya.htm [downloaded July 20, 2011].
- 5 See both Jaffrelot 2008 and the comments in response of Copeman (this volume). Like Jaffrelot I want to attend to offense both as an emergent condition and as learned; like Copeman I recognize the deep historicity of offense and am troubled by the claim that the condition of offense can be reduced to the design of powerful 'interests'. Copeman suggests instead an 'emergent politics of the devotional real'. If the television publics of Baba Ramdev, notwithstanding their occasional mobilization in the form of the protest rally, do not emerge with the affective intensity of the contemporary internet-mediated Sikh publics discussed by Copeman, they nonetheless may make a claim on the condition of the devotional real for many. My effort here to juxtapose Ramdev's teaching on homosexuality with the devotional ethic of a text circulated by the Hindi journal *Kalyan* is to suggest alternative renderings – under the respective signs of accusation and of promise – of how particular homosocialities make claims on the devotional real, and vice versa.
- 6 However, both the Sikh and the Dera Sacha Sauda devotion discussed by Copeman center on sacrificial relations established through excessive bodily giving-over. The Padma Purana story recounted in *Kalyan* attends to an extreme of devotional excess that brings about the end of a community and of a world: all the Vaisnavite and Saivite members of the two gurukuls sacrifice themselves in a total war of devotional realism. The beautiful appearance of the deities after the carnage offers, I am suggesting, the childlike unworldliness of the devotional figure, here the deities, as a contrastive figure to what we might term the sacrificial condition of adult devotion.
- 7 For a powerful example of how P.'s guru turns natak into art, see Frøystad (this volume). Frøystad suggests that Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's teaching utilizes body and technology to produce an intense intimacy – playful, girlish, and childlike, perhaps as with Sri Ramakrishna a recognizable embodiment of the *unworldly* – that is however not 'sexual.' I would argue that P.'s own exquisite art, in his earlier incarnation as a drag queen, also staged a particular intimacy that placed the sexual into question. But the drag – if it drew on the narrative conventions of failure, celebrating a subject whose gender, age, and embodiment places her in a position of estrangement from the object of desire – did not work through the position of the child. The drag queen, in P.'s earlier performances at parties and on film, is inevitably too old for the young men she encounters, a dissonance that comments on the threat and eruption of violence in what P. terms the *natak* of gay life. When P. returns from exile as a teacher, he could be said to have shifted the register of performative intimacy from a gender performance that is 'too old' to one that is 'too young,' the less threatening gender shift of Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar.

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6 The female guru

Guru, gender, and the path of personal experience

Karen Pechilis

In the modern West, personal experience as a modality and method for change is inextricably tied to the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. With its validation of women's feelings that they are unfulfilled in traditional roles, its emphasis on critical reflection on the experience of gendered social roles by individuals and in consciousness-raising group meetings, and its crystallization in phrases such as Carol Hanisch's 'the personal is political', feminism has understood personal experience to be both a catalyst and a path for self and social transformation. It is through the theme of personal experience that 'second wave' feminism intersected with spiritual movements outside of mainstream religion that became prominent during that era,¹ including Wicca, which drew primarily on European Goddess traditions, Zen Buddhism as popularized by D.T. Suzuki, the Zen-inspired Erhard Seminars Training (Est), and what can be called a 'second wave' of Hindu-inspired gurus in the United States, including Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (Osho), Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (Transcendental Meditation), A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (International Society for Krishna Consciousness; ISKCON), and Swami Muktananda (Siddha Yoga).² As Harvey Cox observed in 1977, these religious movements were especially appealing to devotees because they emphasized practice rather than doctrine: 'The influence of Oriental spirituality in the West is hardly something new. . . . But there is something new about the present situation. In previous decades, interest in Oriental philosophy was confined mostly to intellectuals and was centered largely on ideas, not on devotional practices' (Cox 1977: 9). That is, people were interested in doing the spiritual work themselves through devotional practices, and these religious movements encouraged that through various practices, including group rituals (the circle, dancing, chanting) and meditation.

Amplifying the validity of personal experience and women's empowerment aspects of the feminist message, these themes intersected in the significant number of prominent female Hindu-inspired gurus who came to power in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and became public leaders to numerous followers across the globe in what I have previously called a 'third wave' of gurus in the United States.³ These female gurus have already changed the terms of some of the lingering questions about the previous guru movements headed by men: Since a woman is the guru, obviously a woman can play a top leadership role in the organization, and a