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## Guru, Hinduism



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### Synonyms

*ācārya; deśika; upādhyāya; svāmin/swami*

### Definition

In the absence of a centralized institution such as the Church in the West, the person of the *guru*, i.e., of the spiritual master, has emerged from Vedic times as one of the most prestigious protagonists of Indian society. Indeed, it is the *guru* who authenticates, fosters, and transmits the numerous religious traditions (*sampradāya*) of the subcontinent. The “way of the guru” (*guru-vāda*) is the special characteristic not of a particular sect or line of succession but of all Indian religions. From time immemorial the *guru* is thought to be indispensable, the necessary guide in order to achieve the highest goal of liberation (*mokṣa*) from the painful round of rebirths (*saṃsāra*). Only one who is liberated (*mukta*) can lead others along the path: the *guru* is thought to be free from bondage and to know by experience the way towards *mokṣa*. The master’s words and teachings (*upadeśa*), his/her whole persona, are therefore efficacious and regarded as “reliable

testimony” (*āpta-vacana*), a means of knowledge of that which is beyond ordinary perception (*pratyakṣa*) as well as inference (*anumāna*). As in Sikhism, which is the religion of the *guru* par excellence, every Hindu tradition is grounded in the *guru* institute and is perpetuated through it. The master is thought as the upholder of a perennial gnosis (*jñāna*), which he/she interprets and adapts according to the needs of the followers and of society at large. Though a conservative figure, he/she may also be an innovator, i.e., a creative exegete of the transmitted wisdom. *Gurus* are thought to actualize the ancient truths through their lives, teachings, and personal charisma.

### The Constitutive Elements of the guru Institute

The constitutive elements of the *guru* institute are two: (1) The solemn ceremony of initiation (*dīkṣā*) which the *guru* officiates, thanks to which the constituency of the disciples (*śiṣya*) is ordained and the quintessential religious knowledge/experience is transmitted; and (2) the timely individuation by the master of his/her own successor, which he/she must unambiguously select so as to perpetuate the chain of succession (*guru-paramparā*) which had its inception with the first teacher (*ādi-guru*) who gave rise to the tradition [11, 18, 20]. This remains true even if there are cases of “self-made” *gurus* who, independently

from any *sampradāya* and thanks to their charisma, have established themselves as spiritual leaders in their own terms. In fact, the majority of *gurus* of so-called neo-Hinduism who have become popular in the West as well as in the Indian diaspora is of this latter type. Some teachers are founders of new sects and *paramparās*, which may even develop into separate religions (as in the case of Sikhism) and castes (as in the case of the Liṅgāyats), while others do not seek to establish any new movement. There is actually no rule since anyone who can attract disciples can become a *guru*. If most *gurus* are ascetics – often heads of ashrams and monastic centers (*maṭhas*) – there are also *gurus* who are householders. Moreover, even though the *guru* institute is traditionally associated with the masculine gender, there exist even female *gurus*. In this case, one should speak of *gurvīs* or, as is more common, of *mātās/āmmās* (mothers) and *devīs* (goddesses): though their numbers are small, this is a relevant and growing phenomenon in contemporary India [2, 14].

The conferring of initiation is crucial to the definition of a *guru* since he alone is entitled to initiate others. Receiving the *dīkṣā* from the *guru* is what a follower values most. When a teacher judges that his/her pupil has the necessary qualification (*adhikāra*) to be initiated, he/she selects an auspicious day for the celebration of the solemn ceremony. The most common form of initiation is by means of a *mantra* (*mantra-dīkṣā*), a secret formula which at the culminating moment of the ritual the *guru* whispers into the *śiṣya*'s right ear by repeating it three times (in turn, the pupil must also repeat it three times). The secret transmission of the *mantra* is most important, highlighting the *guru*'s otherworldly status and tightening the bond between teacher and disciple. A *mantra* is thought to be efficacious only if received personally from the teacher. The *guru* who imparts the *mantra* is believed to embody the spirit and life of the *mantra*, in an unbroken lineage which goes back to the primeval *ādi-guru*. The *mantra* incorporates the sacred name (*nāma*) which the disciple must constantly remember (*smaraṇa*) and meditate upon: it is usually that of a deity (*devatā*, in Tantric *mantras* often

represented by a single syllable) or of the supreme metaphysical principle (*ātman*, *Brahman*), but it can also be that of the *guru*. The name of the master or deity immediately brings to mind his/her form (*rūpa*), since name and form are truly inseparable. Indeed, the name is thought to be most powerful since god and his name coincide (*nomen = numen*): there is no actual difference between *devatā*, *mantra*, and *guru*.

At the time of initiation, the *guru* may also impart a teaching which is not necessarily verbal. It may be a simple gesture, touch, or look, and it may even be transmitted through silence (*mauna*). The exemplary figure of the master who teaches through eloquent silence is Śiva Dakṣiṇāmūrti, who is especially popular in South India. As the great mystic Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950) once stated: “Preaching is simple communication of knowledge and can be done in silence too. What do you think of a man listening to a harangue for an hour and going away without being impressed by it so as to change his life? Compare him with another who sits in a holy presence and leaves after some time with his outlook on life totally changed. Which is better: to preach loudly without effect or to sit silently sending forth intuitive force to act on others?” ([13], 90).

The belief is that only the *guru* has words – and silences – charged with a supreme, transformative power, which is the power of pure love (*preman*). The master sets the example, his/her entire life being regarded as a teaching to mankind. The disciple basks in the *guru*'s proximity, and such proximity is thought to trigger a process of inner change. Just seeing the master or being seen by him/her, as in the experience of *darśana*, is believed to be a sanctifying, transformative event. The *guru* is a veritable *bolte cālte dev*, “a god that speaks and walks” among men. Although every master exhibits human idiosyncrasies and a characteristic personality, both in his/her way of teaching and day-to-day behavior, the *guru* is nonetheless revered and worshipped as god [6]. As a famous verse of the *Guru-gītā* proclaims: “The *guru* is Brahmā, the *guru* is Viṣṇu, the *guru* is Śiva Maheśvara! The *guru* alone is in all evidence the supreme *Brahman*: prostration to this venerable *guru*!” (*gurur brahmā gurur viṣṇur*

*gurur devo maheśvaraḥ | gurur eva para-brahma tasmai śrī-gurave namaḥ* ॥). It is said that the master creates a spiritual urge in the aspirant and that is his/her Brahmā aspect. The master then feeds this spiritual urge and makes it grow and that is his/her Viṣṇu aspect. Meanwhile, the master removes all doubts and hesitations, all false ideas from the mind of disciples, and that is his/her Śiva aspect. Actually, he/she is thought to be even greater than god since, whereas god is invisible the master is by all means visible and available to humans, who can interact with him/her. The *guru* is thus superior to the *mūrtis*, the mute and immobile icons of gods and goddesses that reside in temples. The idea is that man can cognize god only in the human form. For all followers, the *guru* is an *avatāra*, a divine “descent” who has manifested on earth for the protection of the good, the annihilation of evil-doers, and the (re)establishment of *dharmā*, i.e., righteousness (cf. *Bhagavad-gītā* 4.8).

Truth (*satya*) is a person and it coincides with the master since he/she incarnates the religious ideal. God is not to be found in doctrines or sacred texts, be it even the *Vedas* – which, notwithstanding their importance, are perceived as ancillary, subsidiary devices – but in the momentous experience of a personal encounter, in the intimate relation (*sambandha*) with the *guru*. It is the *master* who validates the tradition and demonstrates through his/her exemplary conduct the truth of the “eternal religion” (*sanātana-dharma*). Such an encounter is decisive being viewed as the turning-point in one’s life. The sheer presence of the master, independently from what he/she says or does, operates the transmutation of the pupil allowing him/her to awake to his/her divine reality. Thus, the *guru* represents what every person actually is, though he/she ignores it. The master functions like a mirror in which the disciple sees the reflection of his/her true identity, which is none other than the pure self (*ātman*). In the end, *guru*, God, *ātman*, and *Brahman* are synonymous, i.e., one and the same.

The master is not limited to his/her body. Even after shedding his/her mortal coil, he/she is thought to be ever active. The teacher’s communion with all devotees is a bond of love that never

ends. Life after life, the idea is that every *bhakta* is destined to encounter his/her *guru* again and again, since the latter never forsakes him/her, even though he/she may forget the *guru*: until they will come to realize their *ātmic*, deathless state, the master will not abandon his/her children. The *guru* is believed to be both immanent, i.e., omnipresent, and beyond name and form, i.e., transcendent. Thus, the two syllables *gu* and *ru* are said to mean one who is “beyond attributes” (*guṇātīta*) and “formless” (*rūpa-varjita*). The master is ultimately to be understood not as an individual but as the supreme spiritual principle, the *guru-tattva*. Typically, at the time of death the *guru*’s body is buried and the tomb (*samādhi*) is believed to be the repository of extraordinary power. The cult of the master can continue and even expand after his/her death through the proliferation of temples and shrines in his/her honor. This has been the case with one of the most beloved saints of modern India, famous throughout the subcontinent and even beyond it, i.e., the Sai Baba of Shirdi (d. 1918) whom Hindus identify with Dattātreya, the exemplary figure of *guru*-god whose cult is most popular in Maharashtra [15].

### **Etymology of the Word guru. Gurus and ācāryas**

The word *guru* is originally an adjective meaning “heavy”/“weighty” (cf. Latin *gravis*) and thus “important”/“influential,” “venerable.” The *guru*, being rooted in the divine self, is someone who is steadfast and solid as a mountain (*giri*). In origin, the term was primarily used to address one’s parents and respectable elders. The first references to *guru* as meaning teacher are found in the early *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*: in 5.10.9, with reference to the deadly sin of violating the teacher’s bed, i.e., of having intercourse with his wife (*guros talpam āvasan*), and in 8.15.1, in the context of serving the teacher. The word *guru* also appears in *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 6.23, where it is said that one should have the same love towards his teacher as towards god, and in *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 1.2.12, where it is stated that one should go to a teacher

well versed in the *Vedas* and focused on *Brahman*. All in all, the term *guru* is rare in the early and middle *Upaniṣads*.

In fact, the most common word for teacher in the Vedic texts is *ācārya*, which is certainly older than *guru*. *Ācārya* is supposed to derive from “right conduct” (*ācāra*) or from the verb “to approach”/“to go for instruction” (*ā* + verbal root *car*): it comes to identify one who knows and who adheres to proper, *dharmic* behavior. Eminent personalities and founders of Vedānta philosophical schools such as Śaṅkara (eighth century CE, founder of *kevalādvaita-vedānta*), Rāmānuja (eleventh to twelfth century CE, founder of *viśiṣṭādvaita-vedānta*), Nimbārka (twelfth to thirteenth century CE, founder of *dvaitādvaita-vedānta*), Madhva (thirteenth to fourteenth century CE, founder of *dvaita-vedānta*), and Vallabha (fifteenth to sixteenth century CE, founder of *śuddhādvaita-vedānta*) are reverentially called *ācāryas*. Moreover, their distinguished disciples and the lineage of *gurus* within their *sampradāyas* are also termed *ācāryas*. Although the words *guru* and *ācārya*, nowadays as in the past, are often used as synonyms, the main difference is that while the *ācārya* is a specialist in Vedic ritual and a scholar endowed with philosophical and exegetical acumen, the *guru* need not be learned in any Vedic branch or theological/philosophical domain.

Indeed, the *guru* is not primarily an intellectual but rather a mystic. According to a widespread, popular etymology, the two syllables which make up the word *guru* mean “he who dispels (*ru*) darkness (*gu*),” i.e., ignorance. The idea is that the *guru* does not transmit mere factual information but brings about the spiritual transformation of the disciples. The relation with the *guru* is therefore subjective and heart to heart, not merely objective. The attitudes toward the *guru* are characterized by intense emotional feelings, whereas the relation between the *ācārya* and his pupils is primarily of an intellectual kind [7, 8].

### The Teacher-Pupil Relation

To be sure, there is no teacher without disciple and vice versa, the two being mutually

interdependent. The seed (= the teacher) can only have life in the soil (= the disciple), but the latter must be ploughed and made fit to receive it. The idea is that when the disciple is ready the teacher infallibly manifests himself/herself since there is an irresistible power of attraction between the two. The teacher brings about the annihilation of the disciple’s ego, which arises from ignorance: this is his/her fundamental function.

In the earlier period, the foundational teacher-pupil relation is the one between the *ācārya* and the Brahmin celibate student (*brahma-cārin*; lit. “one who walks the path of *Brahman*”) aimed at equipping the latter with the indispensable knowledge in order to perform all ritual actions (*karman*), i.e., the Vedic sacrifices (*yajña*). The student would live at the house of his *ācārya* for several years and learn by heart the correct pronunciation and recitation of those portions of the *Veda* that his Brahminical branch (*śākhā*) was in charge of. Starting with the *Upaniṣads*, however, the decisive teacher-pupil relation becomes the one between *guru* and *śiṣya* (lit.: “to be taught/instructed;” the term derives from verbal root *śās*), aimed at transmitting an esoteric, secret gnosis which is of an interior kind, above and beyond the domain of *karman*: only this supreme knowledge is believed to grant the *summum bonum* of *mokṣa* and only the divine *guru* who is its personification is qualified to transmit it efficaciously. Ideally, the *guru* should be both a *śrotriya* and a *brahma-niṣṭha*, i.e., one who is learned in the *Vedas* and adheres to its precepts and who is at all times established in the consciousness of *Brahman*.

In the *Upaniṣads* as well as in the epics, *Purānas* and *Tantras*, the *guru*’s teaching is often set in the form of a dialogue (*saṃvāda*). The divine teacher dialogues with his/her pupils and sometimes it is a deity who acts as teacher (the deity’s wife may figure as his *śiṣya*, as in the case of the dialogues between Śiva and Pārvaṭī). These *saṃvādas* are expressions of the ongoing dialogue between god and man, the one between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna in the *Bhagavad-gītā* being exemplary in this regard. The pupils have the right to question the *guru* on all spiritual subjects: this they should do firmly and thoroughly. In turn, it is the *guru*’s

duty to satisfactorily answer the disciples' queries so as to clear all their doubts (*saṃśaya*).

The liberating knowledge which the master transmits is identified with his/her grace (*kṛpā*), and the disciple responds to it by consecrating himself/herself wholeheartedly to his/her lord through a life of painstaking service and devotion (*bhakti*). The *guru* is grace and the constant remembrance of the *guru* is itself a grace: *guru* and grace are understood to be inseparable. The idea is that the master's grace precedes any human effort. Before the *śiṣya* even knew, the *guru* was already directing/pulling him/her to his side. Beyond words, the *guru* binds the disciple to himself through the power of *preman* and the disciple responds to it by reciprocating this love. This he/she does by means of devotion to the *guru* (*guru-bhakti*) which is the first and foremost virtue of the *śiṣya*, itself a consequence of the *guru*'s grace. *Bhakti* entails a relationship of mutual love which is understood to be much more important than any acquisition of knowledge through learning. All the evils (*pāpa*) and moral impurities of a disciple are thought to be washed away through selfless devotion. In particular, whatever has come in contact with the *guru* such as water and food offerings (*prasāda*) is thought to be supremely holy and to have the power of removing all defilements. Thus, the water that has been touched by the *guru*'s feet is understood to be like the water of the Ganges that washes away all sins: all fords (*īrtha*) and sacred waters are said to be present in it and whoever drinks it will attain instant purification.

### Stages in the guru-śiṣya Relation and the guru's Power

Ideally, the *guru-śiṣya* relation should be marked by three ascending stages which are accounted for in a variety of hymns of praise (*stotra*, *stuti*) honoring the teacher, as, for instance, in the popular *Guru-gītā* [16].

1. The dualistic stage, characterized by the total obedience of the disciple to the master. Such an attitude is of crucial importance and the heart

of *bhakti*. The *śiṣya* must surrender himself/herself totally at the *guru*'s feet. At the time of initiation, the pupil prostrates before the *guru* lying flat on the ground (in the so-called *sāṣṭāṅga-daṇḍavat* manner, i.e., as a fallen stick, touching the ground with his/her eight limbs: hands, breast, forehead, knees, and feet). One must dedicate all energies and skills to serve the master and obey his/her instructions, without feeling burdened. This is the fundamental disposition which a *guru* adept must cultivate. Most followers, however, are too weak and not resolute enough in their faith (*śraddhā*) and surrender (*śaraṇāgati*) to the master, and this is the reason why they are thought to be incapable to progress any further in their spiritual practice (*sādhana*).

2. The stage of the interiorization of the *guru*. Through a variety of meditative practices (*dhyāna*), the disciple comes to recognize the presence of the master within himself/herself, i.e., in his/her own heart. The discovery of the *guru* within, i.e., as *ātman*, leads to the recognition that he/she is the ultimate divine principle (*tattva*). What lies at the core of one's being is none other than the "true *guru*" (*sad-guru*): the exterior *guru* and the inner *guru* are experienced as one and the same and coincide with one's true identity. Once the pupil's intellect (*buddhi*) is purified, he/she realizes that the exterior *guru* is but a reflection of the luminous, inner *sad-guru*. In this way, the *śiṣya* comes to contemplate upon his/her own inner reality.
3. The final stage of the universalization of the *guru* principle. The disciple becomes aware that the *guru-tattva* is not limited to his/her inner realm but is rather omnipresent. All dualistic distinctions between inner and outer, subject and object, you and me, etc., fade away and one comes to realize that there is only one reality which coincides with the *guru-tattva*. Whatever the *śiṣya* sees, touches, hears, tastes, etc., he/she recognizes as being none other than *Brahman* which fills the entire cosmos. As *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 5.1 states: "The world there is full; the world here is full; fullness from fullness proceeds. After taking fully

from the full, it still remains completely full” (*pūrṇam adaḥ pūrṇam idaṃ pūrṇāt pūrṇam udacyate | pūrṇasya pūrṇam ādāya pūrṇam evāvaśiṣyate* ॥). Thus, the pupil experiences the entire world and every creature *sub specie Brahman*, i.e., *sub specie guru*. Devotion to the name (*nāma*) and form (*rūpa*) of the physical *guru* is not abolished but rather sublimated and universalized.

The unconditional obedience of the disciple to the *guru*’s will lends itself to the risks of physical, emotional, and economical abuses. To be sure, a master can easily take advantage of the *śiṣya*’s utter dependence from him/her [9]. In Indian lore, there are many stories of fake *gurus* and ascetics who exploit their followers, and this shows how Hindus have always been keenly aware of the authoritarian dangers that underlie the teacher-pupil relation [12]. Nonetheless, despite the inherent risks of such a bond – in which the pupil, at least in an initial stage, is understood to be the servant/slave (*dāsa*) of his/her lord – the Hindu religious traditions have always regarded the *guru*’s role as the most sacred and irreplaceable of all, being the necessary pathway to *mokṣa*. As it is stated in verse 3 of the *Viveka-cūḍā-maṇi*, a beautiful poem which tradition ascribes to the great *advaita-vedāntin* Śaṅkara: “Three things are, indeed, hard to attain and due only to divine grace: the human condition, the desire for liberation, and the association with an eminent sage” (*durlabhaṃ trayam evaitad devānugraha-hetukam | manuṣyatvaṃ mumukṣutvaṃ mahā-puruṣa-saṃśrayaḥ* ॥).

Although the basic conviction is that a *śiṣya* must stick to one *guru*, he/she is allowed and sometimes advised to go to other, subsidiary *gurus* (*upa-guru*): in fact, there exist various types of *gurus* and a teacher may encourage his/her pupil to go stay with other masters as well and learn from them. Moreover, if a disciple is not satisfied with one’s teacher, he/she may even decide to abandon him/her and eventually resort to another one. There are texts such as the *Kulārṇava Tantra* that explicitly state that if a disciple realizes that his *guru* has faults and no real knowledge, he will incur in no harm by

leaving him. It is often said that whatever you experience in the presence of a teacher will tell you what to think of him/her: if peace, joy, and the stilling of one’s thoughts prevail, then the idea is that he/she is a genuine one. In any case, the truth is that nowadays as in the past there has always been a quite free entering and exiting from ashrams and religious centers. Inmates may leave and new people may come, and *gurus* themselves seem not to be particularly concerned about either losing their followers or acquiring new ones.

The mainstream opinion in Hindu *sampradāyas*, however, especially in Vedānta circles, is that there must be unconditional loyalty to one’s teacher and that he/she should never be forsaken, even if the pupil discovers other *gurus* who appear to be more powerful, attractive, and knowledgeable than his/her own. In other words, once you have probed the teacher and have surrendered yourself to him/her, you are bound to the chosen *guru* for life and there is no question of leaving him/her. Given one’s faith in the master as god or *Īśvara*, the idea of questioning his/her qualifications as if he/she was an ordinary individual should not even arise. How can one find faults in god? Rather, if one finds drawbacks in the teacher it means that there must be something wrong in the way he/she looks at him/her, i.e., the fault is thought to ultimately reside in the eye and mind of the beholder, in his/her ignorance (*avidyā*). Significantly, in Vedānta the Absolute *Brahman* is said to manifest in a triad: god or *Īśvara*, the *guru*, and the *ātman* that needless to say are ultimately one and the same. In *Yoga-sūtra* 1.26 it is even stated that *Īśvara*, who is unlimited by time, is the *guru* of the prior ones, i.e., the *yogins* of former times (*pūrveṣāṃ api guruḥ kālenānavacchedāt* ॥).

Being revered as god, the master is thought to be omnipotent and to possess all sorts of supernatural powers which he/she may manifest through the performance of a vast array of extraordinary feats (*siddhi, camatkāra*). The stories told by devotees about a *guru*’s miracles are aimed at confirming the latter’s status, functioning as proofs of his/her divinity. To be sure, a *guru* that lacks power (*śakti*) is not considered a true *guru*. In turn, the master’s spiritual might determines social

influence and often a very concrete economic power, which may extend itself to the political sphere [4, 10, 17]. Though viewed as the emblem of dispassion and non-attachment (*vairāgya*), a *guru* and his movement – typically centered in a hermitage or monastery – may attract considerable riches. If it is true that real *gurus* steal devotees' hearts, and not their wealth, it is a fact that many of them are honored as “great kings” (*mahā-rājas*) and symbols of royalty figure prominently in their cults. Indeed, devotees are eager to honor their teachers lavishly, with great ostentation and pomp, even if they be ascetics or renunciants (*saṃnyāsīn*). In modern India, some *gurus* have succeeded in establishing veritable “spiritual kingdoms” for themselves, accumulating fabulous fortunes in their careers [19].

### Modern gurus

Important new developments have characterized the *guru* institute in the last century. Starting with the seminal figure of Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) – the famous disciple of Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836–1886) who actively promoted Hinduism in both the United States and Europe – we witness the emergence of *gurus* who have been able to attract global, cosmopolitan audiences, i.e., devotees from all over the world. They usually favor a universalistic approach which advocates inclusivism and religious pluralism, and their teaching is mainly based on Vedānta philosophy, some form of yogic meditation, and the primacy of *bhakti* coupled with service to society (*sevā*) through the promotion of a variety of charitable activities (the building of schools, hospitals, orphanages, the implementation of health programs, etc.). On the other hand, traditional ritual practices (*pūjās*) tend to be deemphasized [1, 3, 5].

Here is a list of some popular teachers: Aurobindo Ghose (1872–1950), promoter of a doctrine of spiritual evolution and of an “integral yoga” (*pūrṇa-yoga*); Ramana Maharshi, the *advaita-vedāntin* mystic who spent his whole life at the Sri Ramanasramam in Tiruvannamalai; Paramahansa Yogananda (1895–1952), founder of

the Self-Realization Fellowship whose *Autobiography of a yogi* (1946) became a worldwide best-seller; Swami Shivananda (1887–1963), founder of the Divine Life Society; Meher Baba (1894–1969), the silent *guru* who presented himself as the ultimate *avatāra* who would usher humanity into a golden age of universal love and brotherhood; Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada (1896–1977), founder of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness better known as the Hare Krishna movement; Nisargadatta Maharaj (1897–1981), the *advaita-vedāntin* mystic from Mumbai whose book *I am That* (1973), an English translation of his talks in Marathi, brought him worldwide recognition; Swami Muktananda (1908–1982), promoter of a form of Tantric Yoga called Siddha Yoga; the controversial Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh/Osho (1931–1990), whose teaching was actually derived from a variety of religions and philosophies; Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1911–2008), *guru* of The Beatles and founder of Transcendental Meditation; Sathya Sai Baba (1926–2011), revered by his followers as a *pūrṇāvatāra*, i.e., a full manifestation of the divine, whose world-wide fame is primarily due to the many miracles that are attributed to him.

Among women *gurus* especially significant has been the figure of Anandamayi Ma (1896–1982), worshipped as a manifestation of the Goddess Kālī. In more recent years, Mata Amritanandamayi (b. 1953) – the “mother” who embraces her devotees – has acquired noticeable renown.

For middle-class Hindus living in urban contexts, the figure of the *guru* has been and continues to be most important as a means to rediscover their own religious tradition – linking them to their forefathers and an idealized village life – and thus fortify their identity. Being a devotee of a *guru* is not merely a private affair but entails becoming part of a larger community (*saṅga*) represented by the master's organization, which is more egalitarian than the society at large and which becomes a sort of new family for all adepts.

Given the human need for spiritual guidance, I think that the *guru* institute will continue to play a crucial role in the shaping and ongoing

redefinition of the religious landscape of India and of what we call Hinduism. New *gurus*, be they individuals endowed with special charisma or figures belonging to time-honored, well-established *paramparās*, regularly appear on the scene replacing those who have passed away or who have simply sunk into oblivion. The fortune of the *guru* institute lies precisely in its flexibility and openness, since virtually anybody can claim to be a spiritual master. The exceptional status of *gurus* and *āmmās* is ultimately decided by their capacity to attract a conspicuous number of followers and convince them of their superhuman qualities.

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