

Manufacturing Charisma in the Metropolis

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Prologue

Let the reader imagine a busy street scene in bustling Mumbai. An elderly man is involved in a traffic accident, hurting his leg. The driver of the car that hit him offers to take him to the nearest hospital, but the man would much rather go to the state hospital near his home, than to a private one in some other part of the city. He has a return train ticket and asks the driver to help him get to the train station. After a lengthy discussion, the driver persuades the man to accept a lift in his car to the hospital of his choice.

That he had crossed the street in that particular place at that particular time must have been divine providence, the man reminisced years after the accident, his eyes welling up with tears of emotion.¹ At the time he was relating this incident, we were standing in the hallway of the dilapidated multi-storey building he was living in, and he had been breathlessly praising his divine protectors in every imaginable way for more than half an hour. Back then he had one wish only, he continued, namely, to ride in a certain car model, a model that had just come out and that he often admiringly watched driving by on his daily walks from his home to his shop and back. And then, suddenly, his dream came true: the car that knocked him down was that exact model! From the many different cars on the road that could have hit him, it just had to be this particular one, the one of his choice. Equally preordained was the driver's insistence to take him to the hospital in his car, for in this way his wish was realized. After a few moments of silence, he whispered: "All this was Their will." He repeated the sentence several times with a quivering voice, hands folded, his eyes lovingly fixed on the calendar image hanging on the wall opposite the door that lead into the small room where he lived. His life had been full of miracles, he then added, ever since the two Divine Lights

¹ Our conversation took place in the spring of 2015. Previous extensive fieldwork on the movement discussed in this essay was conducted in 2008 and 2009 in cooperation with Michael Stausberg (University of Bergen), with the generous financial support of the Humboldt Foundation.

(*divyajyotīs*), Gururani Nagkanya Yogini and Jimmy Nagputhra Yogiraj, had been watching over him.

The Ubiquity of Miracles

This instance of a “miracle story” is not exactly what one would call a typical example of a genre that has been described as comprising narratives of events and states so special, “so unusual, extraordinary, and supernatural that the normal level of human consciousness finds them hard to accept them rationally.”² It is quite unlikely that an external observer of the occurrence described above would have found anything out of the ordinary about it. And yet, despite the fact that our protagonist’s miracle story did not seem to rise to the occasion — one would have expected stories about being somehow rescued from the accident in the first place, or an instantaneous healing from his injuries —, he interpreted the event in its entirety as a direct result of divine intervention.

Accounts such as this one were not singular among the followers of the two charismatic figures. Our conversation partner himself related several other incidents involving, for example, missing and then “miraculously” materializing small change in a trivial grocery-shop transaction, or the re-discovery of some personal document that seemed to have been lost a long time ago. Other devotees had similar mundane stories to tell, which may seem petty to an outsider but are highly significant to those involved, and serve to reinforce other many moving stories also told by Gururani’s devotees that involved matters anyone would identify as deeply existential, such as spectacular recoveries from life-threatening illnesses, getting away unscathed after the bomb attack on the Bombay Stock Exchange, landing the job of one’s life, or being freed from powerful malignant spirits.³ While records of miracles of the latter type can be found

² Waida (2005: 6049). On the same page, Waida continues: “These miracles are usually taken as manifestations of the supernatural power of the divine being fulfilling his purpose in history, but they are also caused to occur “naturally” by charismatic figures who have succeeded in controlling their consciousness through visions, dreams, or the practices of meditation.” On South Asian narratives and conceptions of the miraculous, further see the contributions in Dempsey and Raj (2008).

³ Reports about devotees’ recoveries from chronic or incurable diseases are abundant both in the movement’s written and oral communication. In the yearly publications (the ‘Journals’), these accounts are given ample space and they occur either in a collective, indeterminate form or as personalized biographical events. An example for the first type is included already in a publication that dates from 1985: “I have seen people who had lost their vision being restored

effortlessly in many religious contexts, less conspicuous accounts of apparently insignificant occurrences or even non-events interpreted as signs from above are perhaps even stronger indicators of the high religious commitment of believers and, at the same time, of the unimpeachable prestige and authority of religious leaders.⁴

In the case of this group such prestige seems to rely not on some salvific message, or teachings of self-empowerment, or the application of psycho-somatic techniques, but to a large extent on an insistently proliferated cluster of characteristics tied to sequences from the lives of the group's leaders,⁵ combined with a colourful mythological-iconographic imagery and carefully choreographed events called *darśans*, during which the two leaders are worshipped as living divine images, who in turn issue blessings to the assembled crowd.⁶ As we have given a detailed description of the *darśans* as well as an analysis of these events as staged epiphanies elsewhere (Keul and Stausberg 2010), this essay proposes to inquire instead mainly into the ways in which rather unspectacular occurrences from the biography of Gururani (the movement's founder) are hyperbolized in the movement's publications in order to illustrate her allegedly extraordinary capacities as well as her trans-religious appeal. The focus on selected chronological stages in the gradual divinization of the founding figure will also reveal some of the more important stepping-stones in the formation of a thriving religious movement in a metropolitan context. Texts from the 2011 anniversary issue of the movement's yearly publications will serve as the main reference, as they are much

with sight. The deformed, the lame, the paralysed, the bedridden begin to walk and function as normal humans. [...] I have seen the ones possessed of evil spirits and evil entanglements being completely relieved of their torturous evility and being purified in body and spirit.” (Gandhi 1985: n.p.)

⁴ Instead of inquiring into what “really” happens in miracle stories, or scrutinizing the “truthfulness” of (self-) presentations offered in connection with deity-saint-gurus, Smriti Srinivas (2008: 16) insightfully suggests to consider the importance of devotees' feelings of hopefulness about themselves in their relationship with such charismatic figures, and to “take devotees' assertions about miracles [...] seriously, as descriptions of the ‘hopeful’ reality that they inhabit.”

⁵ Since its formalization in 1982 as the Satguru Gururani Mandal, the attempts of the group at biographically legitimizing charisma materialize each year in a publication titled *Journal*, with a partly repetitive content. In the absence of other notable texts, these brochures can be seen as having the role of a textual and visual canon. On the complex relationship between charisma and canon in the South Asian context, see the contributions in Dalmia et al (2001).

⁶ The format of the events has only remote similarities with Amma's *devībhāva*, discussed in Lucia (2014).

more elaborate in bio-hagiographical details and supporting pictorial material than those included in other brochures.

Iconography

The picture in my interlocutor's room looked familiar, and I later found that same calendar in my archive of materials collected over several years of research on the group. It was from 2004, already eleven years old at the time of our encounter, and had been framed and hung on the wall according to the recommendation given on the last page of the calendar block.⁷ The image depicted a woman and a man in shiny, golden attires, both adorned with thick garlands of red roses and assorted jewellery: tiaras with pearls and what looked like precious stones, rings, pearl-studded necklaces. Halos surrounded not only their heads where the bright, diffuse circles were interrupted by radial beams, but also their raised right hands (palms towards the viewer) offering reassurance and imparting blessings to their devotees. Only the upper bodies of the two figures were visible. From the waist down they blended into a blue-green snake floating over (or resting on) a heavenly body, presumably Earth. Wafts of mist (or billows of smoke) swirled through the entire scenery, obscuring somewhat the picture, except for the core part with the two religious leaders and their backdrop, a huge snake hood with nine golden snakeheads flicking red, forked tongues. A more dynamic element in the visual composition could be found in the upper left corner, a winged horse in flying gallop, opposite a depiction of another well-known Persian motif, a bearded man in a winged circle. The calendar image was titled in large red capital letters "The Living Divine Lights of the Cosmos", with the names of the two persons in the subtitle: "Param Ishwar Sri Jimmy Nagputhra (Yogiraj) & Param Ishwari Sri Gururani Nagkanya (Yogini)."

Many of the movement's yearly calendars carry similar colourful displays of the leaders' divine splendour. In the one from the following year, for example, the two

⁷ The text on the last page included not only instructions on framing and placing, but also indications for the disposal of the image: "[S]uch calendars should be owed in flowing sea water along with fresh flowers and adequate dakshina at the end of the year. Where there is no such facility, the calendar may be soaked in water till the colours of it fade out and thereafter the remains of the pulp may be kept in the midst of trees and plants. [...] If desired, at the end of the year, the photo of this calendar can be framed. However, framing of this calendar at the beginning of the year shall nullify the blessings conferred therefrom. Calendars of Divine pictures and Symbols preferably be kept on the wall facing the main and front door of the house" (2004 calendar, last page).

figures, dressed in long, flowing golden robes, are seated on a wide golden throne covered with red velvet, with snakeheads as armrests and the nine-headed snake hood as a canopy. A powerful waterfall splashes onto the canopy, only to morph into a terraced stream flowing from beneath the throne. Such eclectic visual compositions also regularly serve as illustrations in the movement's yearly *Journals*. These annual brochures, nearly two hundred pages strong, contain mostly devotional texts in Hindi, English, Marathi, and Gujarati, along with information on some of the movement's activities of the past year. The *Journals* are lavishly illustrated and include in addition to the calendar-type images described above further examples of iconographic conceptualizations, such as a picture with Gururani and Jimmy on a sun-chariot drawn by seven horses, or various other colourful versions of the two *divyajyotīs* sitting on a snake throne or standing, heavily garlanded, on a lotus floating in the ocean. These and other images seem to express far-reaching, even universal aspirations, and may explain the movement's relatively broad appeal. The combination of elements from the iconographic and mythological repertoire of Hinduism and Zoroastrianism contributed over the last decades to attracting thousands of followers with various religious affiliations. This seems rather surprising, given the fact that both religious leaders are middle-class Parsi Zoroastrians, originating thus from a religious tradition that is usually not known for charismatic figures with a wide-ranging trans-religious reach.⁸

Categorizing Attempts

The movement led by its founder Gururani Nagkanya and the much younger Jimmy (an abbreviated and anglicised form of the Parsi name Jamshed) Nagputhra⁹ belongs to the kind of religious innovations that easily fall through typological cracks and—especially if followers are numerically inconspicuous—are not mentioned in handbooks or in introductory works on the respective “parent religions”¹⁰ to which they are indebted. It is another example of the religious creativity encountered in the Indian subcontinent's religious history. At the same time it also illustrates the broad internal diversity not only of one, but two religious traditions.¹¹

⁸ With the exception of Meher Baba (Merwan Sheriar Irani, 1894–1969).

⁹ This is the Pahlavi form of *nāgaputra*.

¹⁰ See, for example, the classification of new religious formations according to their roots in Partridge (2004).

¹¹ For reflections on the types and fluidity of religious marginality see Wessinger (1993: 4–6).

The movement can be described as a peripheral form of Zoroastrianism. The two leaders (“light bearers,” *jyotdhārīs*), Gururani and Jimmy have a Parsi Zoroastrian background and a number of long-time and close Zoroastrian followers. Some of the fundamental cosmogonic and cosmological tenets discussed in the group’s publications are of Zoroastrian provenance: The important part played by the primordial utterance *Ahunwar* in the creation of the world; the bipolarity of bright and dark, good and evil in both the human and divine realm; the efficacy of prayer in supporting the forces of good in times when the evil spirit gains in strength, and misery and destruction spread across the world. The Zoroastrian formula of “good thoughts, good words and good deeds” recurs in several texts published by the group. Ritual worship offered to Gururani and Jimmy includes the recitation of Avestan texts by Zoroastrian priests. The prayer caps and scarves worn by the devotees are Parsi-inspired, and several of the group’s publications have Zoroastrian iconographic elements depicted both on the front cover and inside.

It is possible to approach the movement also from another angle, by singling out the many traits that clearly illustrate its proximity to Hindu-oriented religious beliefs and practices. There are numerous such elements in the movement’s textual, ritual and iconographic program. The ritual repertoire includes the offering of light (*ārtī*), the recollection of divine presence through remembrance/recitation of the deity-saints’ names (*nāmasmaraṇa*), ritual adornment with flowers, clothes and jewellery (*śṛṅgār*), and devotional songs (*bhajan*). As mentioned before, the movement’s publications carry colourful illustrations showing Gururani and Jimmy standing on a lotus, protected by a nine-headed snake. Other relevant iconographic elements are the depiction of the Śaiva *triśul* (trident), either in Gururani’s hand, or on the cover illustration of the 2006 *Journal* (depicted there with a *śivaliṅga*); hand positions (*mudrās*) known from the Hindu (and Buddhist) context, the sun-chariot as their vehicle, and others.

Further, the two leaders are referred to as gurus, avatars, and deities. A description of the guru’s function is given on one of the first pages of several *Journals*. According to this text passage, a guru is a divine entity who incarnates in human form and works selflessly for the welfare of the entire mankind and for every soul’s spiritual advancement.¹² This is also the gist of the numerous and copious odes to and hymnic

¹² Guru ek tattva hotā hai jo mānav-rūp meṃ dhartī par avatarit hokar samast prāṇī jāti ke kalyāṇ tathā ātmā kī unnati ke liye din rāt ghor kaṣṭ uṭhātā hai (*Journal* 2007: 4).

praises (in prose or verse) of Gururani and Jimmy, found on most pages of the Journals. The divine pedigree of the two gurus places them in mythological proximity to the *nāgas*, “fabled creatures of the waterworld” and of a “magnificent world situated under” (Driver 1985, no pagination). We learn from the same text that Gururani was in one of her previous births a *nāgkanyā* or a serpent princess. In addition, in a large number of devotional texts published in the Journals, Gururani is identified with Lakṣmī, Śakti and Pārvatī, and Jimmy with both Viṣṇu and Śiva. The appellatives used to express Gururani’s divine attributes are taken almost exclusively from the Hindu mythology and include: supreme goddess (*param īśvarī*), many-splendored (*mahātejasvī*), utmost powerful (*mahāśaktiśālī*), and primordial divine power/energy (*ādyāśakti*). As another example for an attempt at tapping into the Śaiva iconographic repertoire, on the stage at important festivals as well as in some of illustrations in the Journals, the figures of Gururani and Jimmy are embedded in elaborate Himalayan sceneries.

From Biography to Hagiography: Gururani’s Childhood and Youth

The early biographical details of the woman around whom a substantial following of “devotee-disciples” (*bhakt-śiṣya*) would eventually coalesce, are sketchy and filtered through a thick hagiographical lens. Nargis Minocher Bharucha, later to be known as Gururani, was born sometime in the 1930s. The movement’s publications provide little information about her early years. Her birth is presented in a brochure from 1985 as an event of universal significance, an incarnation in human form, “in a humble and pious Zoroastrian family,” of the highest power/divinity (*paramaśakti*) with a clear mission: “[T]o show [humanity] the way to the righteous Path [...], to uplift the suffering and downtrodden by pardoning them of their sins and alchemizing them into purer beings.”¹³ In a more recent booklet from 2011, Gururani’s advent is described as another example of the ultimate power (*nirākār śakti*) manifesting on earth, this time in the form of a divine little girl (*divya bālikā*) born into a Zoroastrian family with the mission of guiding humans from the “path of downfall” (*patan ke mārg*) back to the path of true human *dharma*: a life of truth, love, compassion, forgiveness, and charity. Seeing the beauty of the baby girl, her parents decided to name her “Nargis” (narcissus), described in the text as a “fascinating, fragrant flower.”¹⁴

¹³ Ratanshaw Gandhi, “President’s Message” in *Satguru Gururani Mandal Annual Day Celebrations 1985* (hereafter *Journal 1985*).

¹⁴ I reproduce here the passage paraphrased above:

According to the same text, one that is somewhat more detailed than others on Gururani's early exploits, Nargis was a quiet and contemplative child who effortlessly entered into long periods of profound meditation, even when being in the midst of her family and relatives. In this state she would listen to the “divine/celestial sound” (*śivanād, īśvarīy nād*) — receiving through this channel her spiritual (*adhyātmik*) education, in addition to learning at school the things related to her everyday, worldly dealings.

Biographical articles in the movement's other yearly publications mostly follow the same pattern, with recollections and evocations of episodes from Gururani's childhood presented as illustrations and evidence of her divinity. These passages are often embedded in musings on the long-term implications and present-day consequences of her early inclinations and unusual qualities, as well as general statements on the nature of divine avatars. After evoking the extraordinary circumstances of Gururani's birth, the 2011 article continues by emphasizing that in addition to being an avatar, a divine being herself, she always regarded her parents to be gods on earth (*dhartī ke bhagvān*), serving them devotedly throughout their entire life, which the text's (unnamed) author sees as a clear evidence of her true divine nature.¹⁶ Further, Gururani's ability to know everyone's inner feelings and her all-pervasiveness (she is described as an *antaryāmin*, an “inside-dweller”) is understood to have manifested already in little Nargis's habit to answer her siblings' questions before they themselves were even able to finish them. A “miraculous” childhood episode is interpreted as early evidence for two essential characteristics of the later Gururani, namely her power of increasing the wealth of her followers, as well as her frugal, undemanding lifestyle: the occasional pocket money received from her father turns into large heaps of coins in her desk's drawer. Her father's expression of amazement is

Satya, prem, karuṇā, kṣamā, dān ādi daivīy guṇoṃ ko apne jīvan meṃ dhāraṇ karke īśvarīy path par āge baḍhnā hī vāstav meṃ mānav dharm hai, īśvar kī saccī upāsanā hai / mānav dharm se bhraṣṭ honā hī patan kā mārg hai arthāt īśvar se vimukh honā / apnī sarvaśreṣṭh racnā, manuṣya ko patan ke mārg se bacāne ke liye paramśakti har yug meṃ alag-alag samay par, alag-alag sthānoṃ par mānav śarīr dhāraṇ karke pṛthvī par janm letī hai / aise hī zarhostī dharm ke ek parivār meṃ [...] nīrākār śakti ke ek aṃś ne divya bālikā ke rūp meṃ janm liyā / us divya bālikā kā sundar salonā dekhkar mātā–pitā ke man meṃ nargīs nām rakhne kī bhāvnā jagī aur nām rakhā gayā ‘nargīs,’ jo ek choṭā durlabh parantu ākarśit karnevāle sugandhit phūl kā nām hai. (Journal Silver Jubilee 25 (1986–2011), hereafter *Journal* 2011, 29).

¹⁶ See *Journal* 2011: pp. 38–42 for biographical episodes and corresponding photographs from Gururani's childhood.

addressed in the text by a rhetorical question: What could little Nargis have answered to this, she who has come to Earth as the goddess Mahālakṣmī to bestow abundance onto her devotees, and who herself has never had and does not have any yearnings for enjoyment (*mauj-śauk*)?

Included in the 2011 brochure text is also a story aimed at anchoring Gururani's trans-religious propensity in her childhood. Nargis is said to have kept in her cabinet images of Hindu deities to whom she regularly offered prayers at night, hidden from sight behind the cabinet's doors. She did this secretly in order to not to offend the religious sensitivities of her (Zoroastrian) family. According to the text, only after worshipping the deities was she able to sleep contentedly, being restless otherwise. Finally, Śiva himself is said to have saved her from this predicament by telling her that the deities are able to hear her prayers from anywhere, which meant that there was no need for her to sneak out at night anymore.¹⁵ The communication with Śiva and other Hindu deities seems to have been so intense, that at some point little Nargis told her parents that Śiva was her actual father. The childhood sequences of our protagonist's biography also contain a brief passage on Nargis's musical talent. The narrator points out that, although she was fond of music and studied it with her father (who was a music teacher before becoming an employee of the British India Steam Navigation Company), Gururani moved on to pursue her divine mission of working restlessly and altruistically for the welfare and salvation of mankind.

The biographical episodes from Gururani's childhood and youth mentioned above are accompanied by a number of black-and-white photographs. Some of them appear as though they have been taken from a family album, such as the photo of a perhaps two-year old, pensive-looking Nargis, clad in a flowery dress, a necklace with a large pendant round her neck, and a ribbon in her hair. The picture was made fit for the occasion by a caption that reads "Divine fragrance in an earthly garden" (*dhartī ke bāg meṃ khudāi mahak*), and a white halo positioned around the little girl's head. Another black-and-white family-album-type picture, placed in the paragraph describing

¹⁵ Kumāri nargis mīnū kī almārī meṃ kuch devī-devatāoṃ kī tasvīreṃ thīṃ, jinke bāre meṃ unke sīvā koī nahīṃ jāntā thā aur ve bhī is bāt ke liye pūrī tarah satark rahtī thīṃ ki is bāt se kisī ke man ko koī thes na pahūnce / kintu in khudāi tasvīroṃ kī bandagī kiye binā ve becaīn rahtī thīṃ / rāt meṃ sabke so jāne par cupcāp uṭhkar almārī ke do palāḍoṃ ke bīc samākar, ve in khudāi svarūpoṃ kī bandagī kartī thīṃ, tab unheṃ cain kī nīnd ātī thī / putrī kī is uljhan se use chudhāne ke liye pitāśrī śiv ne nād meṃ kahā – beṭī nargīs, tum jahāṃ se bhī bandagī karogī, vah in khudāi svarūpoṃ tak pahūncegī. (Journal 2011, 41-42).

Gururani's respectful treatment of her parents shows Gururani together with them, her brother, and her two sisters. Probably about twenty years old at the time, Gururani's attire and demeanour are *brahmacāriṇī*-like, with a golden- or silver-bordered immaculate white sari and little jewellery (delicate ear studs, few bangles, thin rings). A halo has been added here, too, as well as a forehead mark (*tilak*) in the form of an S-shaped snake, a mark that would later become her distinctive characteristic on every published photograph. A third early picture, probably from the family album as well, shows Gururani's father with his numerous music students. It is inserted on the page where Gururani's musical activities are mentioned, along with a series of images taken much later and appearing to have been staged to match the relevant episode. In one of these photographs Gururani's eyes are closed, her head tilted somewhat theatrically upwards, and she is apparently playing and at the same time rather unconventionally also lifting a *tānpūrā* (a traditional string drone instrument) from the ground. In another photograph Gururani is holding both the *tānpūrā* and a *kartāl* (small percussion instrument with cymbals). In all these images her head is surrounded by a halo, and a long caption under one of the photos alludes to later displays of Gururani's musicality: her "divine voice" (*khudāī āvāz*) is so compassionate and truthful, that listening to it brings tears to one's eyes and causes one's hair to stand on end in a thrill of delight (*romṅṅe khaḍe ho jāte haiṃ*).¹⁶

The account of young Nargis's relationship with Hindu deities similarly has pictorial support in the form of two photographs tailored for the occasion: One that was apparently taken during the same session as the pictures with the music instruments shows Gururani with her face lightly veiled, seated on a bed beside what looks like an improvised house shrine with small statues of Śiva, Hanumān and a goddess (perhaps Durgā), and an image of Zarathustra. The second one, probably taken a few years later, depicts Gururani seated at a small table with statues and images, among them Gaṇeśa, Shirdi Sai Baba and Zarathustra.

Workplace Charisma

According to the bio-hagiographical text in the 2011 publication, upon completing her education Gururani takes up a government-office job at the Indian Railways, "to earn

¹⁶ *Journal* 1985, 41. According to several devotees I spoke with, until some years ago there were instances when Gururani sang at the *darśans*.

her livelihood” (*jīvan-nirvāh ke liye*), continuing, however, to “continuously shower compassion from her heart onto the world.”¹⁷ In this section, too, the text often digresses into general observations concerning the nature of divinity. Here is an example: No matter in which form or contexts divine incarnations manifest themselves, their minds remain constantly connected to the supreme spirit (*adhyātma se juḍā rahtā hai*). Thus, after finishing her daily work duties on time, Gururani immerses herself in meditation and prayer, leaving a lasting impression on two of her co-workers, who gradually begin to recognize the divinity in her. A photograph of these two early devotees is inserted in the text. Also, Gururani regularly inquires after the well-being of all her colleagues’ family members, ending these conversations by dispensing her blessings to them. This contributes, according to the text, to keeping everybody safe from illness and every kind of trouble. Over time, more colleagues become increasingly attracted to her spiritual qualities, and persons with whom she interacts are said to have the urge to spend even more time in her proximity: being present in the “circle of splendour” (*ābhāmaṇḍal*) radiated by Gururani has a soothing effect on their minds.¹⁸ Gururani’s devotees even went to great lengths to accompany her on her daily commute to work by local train.

The text in the 2011 publication includes glimpses into Gururani’s daily life from the time when she is still working in the office, but has already attained divine status in the eyes of a constantly growing group of followers. We read, for instance, that she is courteous and well-mannered in her everyday dealings at work (*śiṣṭācār se calti thīṃ*), keeping out of earshot whenever somebody speaks on the phone, for which she is praised by her supervisor. She also has the habit of spreading out a handkerchief before sitting down, a gesture those who do not know her well misinterpret as a measure to protect the cleanliness of her clothes; the real reason behind this being, however, to show respect to Mother Earth.¹⁹

¹⁷ [...] unke hṛday se jīvamātra ke prati karuṇā ki barsāt nirantar hotī rahī (*Journal 2011*, 43). The episodes and photographs related to Gururani’s time as office worker are related on pages 43–47.

¹⁸ Kāryālay ke log tathā anya vyakti kumārī nargis mīnū ke āspās ke parisar meṃ anāyās hī ākar baiṭh jāte yā ṭahalte rahte, kyomki unheṃ is ābhāmaṇḍal meṃ ek viśeṣ prakār kī manaḥ-sānti miltī thī (*Journal 2011*, 43).

¹⁹ This habit was later emulated by her devotees, to the extent that handkerchiefs are now being spread out even on chairs before sitting down.

Again, the anecdotal sequences are followed by a passage with sweeping reflections on the nature of divinity and its relationship with devotees, this time with a somewhat circular reasoning, but in the typical hyperbolizing manner. Even though the passage is inserted to explain Gururani's attractivity for a growing number of people, the unknown author's spatio-temporal points of reference are not less than the entire world and eons: Whenever divinities incarnate on earth, souls start rallying around them and taking refuge in them. These souls were not yet able to embark on the road to liberation, but they had some kind of connection with divine avatars from earlier ages. During their previous lives, their spiritual advancement was obstructed, and divinity incarnates on earth in order to help these souls progress spiritually. And even before they take refuge in the divine incarnation, says the text, the divine power protects them. And finally: those who have a true longing for the avatars, are drawn to them from all corners of the world, like iron to a magnet (*Journal* 2011: 44).

Other aspects central to the movement's ideology are also exemplified with the help of biographical episodes from Gururani's time as an office employee. For example, according to the text, at some point she starts reminding her colleagues of festivals and prescribed rituals of their respective religious tradition. This would later become one of the often-repeated core messages, namely that "one must stay devoted to and selflessly practice the teachings of one's own birth religion," ensuring in this way that the path leading to the liberation of the soul becomes accessible (*uske ātma-mukti kā mārg sugam ho sake*) (Vania 1985: n.p.). In addition, we learn that Gururani seems to have been well aware of her colleagues' votive pledges. When one of her female co-workers does not follow up on her resolution to offer fifty paise worth of sandalwood at one of the Zoroastrian fire temples, Gururani reminds and gently reprimands her. Gururani's self-abnegation is also illustrated and commented as follows: Whenever she takes a sandwich or biscuits with her for her lunch break, she gives them away on her way to work to "some hungry, wretched and distressed, or [otherwise] worthy person" (*kisī bhūkhe, dīn-dukhī yā yogya vyakti ko*), getting through the day by drinking tea only. For, the text continues, when it comes to her own life, she has never given any importance to comfort, pleasure, enjoyment, rest, hunger, thirst or sleep. The last office anecdote presented in the *Journal* text is intended to illustrate our protagonist's divine nature: An ardent female follower recites Gururani's name while sprinkling water on a *śivaliṅga* at a street shrine somewhere in the city, and Gururani, engrossed in work at

her office, suddenly feels drops of water falling down on her. She closes her eyes, moments of introspection follow, and she smiles knowingly (*Journal* 2011: 82).

Metropolitan Asceticism and the Amarnath Revelation

The chronology of events in Gururani's life during the transition period to a full-time divine guru is not made entirely clear in the biographical passages from the movement's publications. However, two key moments that seem to have occurred in the late 1960s are clearly discernible and given decisive weight in every bio-hagiographical narrative. They are attempts at legitimizing Gururani's claims to an exceptional status by exploiting topoi from the cultural repertoire of Hinduism: the Himalayan ascetic and the Vedic-Brahmanic ritual specialist. Gururani's brief brush with ancient renouncer traditions is presented in a rather dramatic manner as a psychological conflict and a series of visionary experiences that culminate in the founding myth of the movement's central sanctuary. According to the 2011 text, repeated and prolonged meditative states lead her to a resolution that takes her family and immediate circle of friends and followers by surprise: Without talking about her plans to anyone, she decides to continue her life as an ascetic in the Himalayas. As a token of remembrance she consigns to her younger sister two small gold ornaments along with an accompanying note. She leaves her father's house, stopping for some time at her small flat in Parel. There,

[h]er mind was restless: She saw before her eyes the faces of thousands of suffering people and the grand plan of world salvation, but also her mother and father, her two sisters and her brother. Remembering Śiva, she immersed herself in meditation. After a while there was a knock at the door. From the natural union with the highest spirit she forced her soul back to Earth and opened the door. (*Journal* 2011: 48).

It was her parents and her maternal uncle, who came to ask her to reconsider her decision and to tell her that they were aware of the great task she had taken upon herself. They assure her that they would not interfere with whatever she was planning to do and that there was no need for her to leave. Unable to bear the thought of her daughter's departure, her mother faints. At this point in the text, Gururani's inner conflict resurfaces, as it is for the first time – even though “for the benefit of hundreds of thousands of downtrodden souls” – that Nargis causes pain to her parents. And it is

impossible, the text continues, to convert into words the indescribable suffering she carries in her heart when she realises this (*Journal 2011: 50*). Again, it is “father Śiva” who gauges the depths of the young woman's soul (*pitāśrī śiva ne putrī ke man kī thāh lagā lī*): Gururani has visions of the Himalaya and of other worlds, and suddenly realizes that “everything can be found at this very place” (*unke man ko samādhān milā ki yahīm par sab kuch hai*), and she does not have to leave. And that is why, concludes the (unnamed) author, it was here she “started the difficult work of prayer and worship for the welfare/salvation of humanity, forgetting about hunger and thirst, sleep and rest, at night and in daytime, and by having *darśan* sessions and performing *yajñas* she dispensed her blessings on her devotees and disciples.”²⁰

The place in question was Gururani’s small flat in a multi-storey apartment block in Central Mumbai, referred to in many text passages in the movement’s publications with the formula “*agyārī-cum-mandir-cum-masjid darbār Parel Mumbai – 33*.” The residence of the foundress, situated in the postal code area 400 033 in Parel, is the cross-religious *sanctum* (“fire temple-cum-temple-cum-mosque”) in which Gururani performs spiritual practices (*sādhana*) and holds court (*darbār*). A few years later her designated successor, co-leader and co-divinity,²¹ Jimmy, also moves in. Several photographs included in the 2011 *Journal* show a bright-haloed Gururani sitting on the floor in what looks like a small living room, either talking to groups of devotees of various sizes, or being surrounded by a larger crowd. In one of the images, a man is standing in front of her while she performs *prāṇāyāma*, and in another we see her parents sitting on a couch in the corner of the room, watching their daughter speak to what looks like a family of devotees. One cannot help but notice the serious, at times even sombre-looking atmosphere in all of these images, with not a single smiling face to be seen. Other photographs depict Gururani alone, posturing as an ascetic; she is seated cross-legged with eyes closed, (as if) engrossed in meditation, a bright halo around her head, sometimes holding a Śaiva *triśul*.

Another much-circulated narrative of an event from the late 1960s that aims at establishing Gururani’s wide-ranging religious credentials encapsulates two distinct

²⁰ Kumārī nargis mīnū apne sādhanā agyārī-kam-mandir darbār parel mumbaī-33 meṃ jagat-kalyāṇ ke liye bhūkh-pyās, nīnd-ārām bhulākar rāt-din kaṭhin baṇdagī-pūjā karne lagīm aur darśan baiṭhak evaṃ yajña-jaśnā sampann karke apnā āśīrvād bhakt-śiṣyom ko pradān karne lagīm (*Journal 2011: 50–51*).

²¹ One of the formulas often used to express the relative status of the two figures is *mānav rūp do, śakti ek* (two embodiments, one divine force).

subthemes. First, it claims to tell the story of the “official” recognition of her innate religious expertise and special connection to the divine. Secondly, the event is presented as the antecedent moment of the later, regular, large-scale gatherings, originating at the initiative of an inner circle of followers. As the story goes, apparently shortly after she abandons her plans to become a Himalayan ascetic, Gururani visits the Śiva temple at Ambarnath situated around 50 kilometres to the northeast of Mumbai in the Thane district. According to both oral and written sources, the temple priests and the mendicants present there at the time of Gururani’s visit instantly recognize and acknowledge her exceptional qualities, and ask her to return and take active part in the performance of *yajña* rituals:

On their requests, the Goddess Poojniya Gururani Nagkanya (Yogini) used to perform yagna (jashan) and shower her divine blessings on large numbers of sadhaks and devotees who used to attend the yagnas/jashans. All those who used to attend the holy ceremony and seek the divine blessings of Poojniya Gururani Mata experienced miraculous benefits and tremendous relief from their long-standing sufferings. Large numbers of devotees started attending, and on repeated requests of the devotees, open darshana-baithaks were conducted at places in and around Bombay.²²

While it seems quite unlikely that orthodox Brahmin priests of an 11th-century Hindu temple²³ would invite or even allow a Zoroastrian woman to actively participate in “performing” an elaborate Vedic ritual, it is not improbable that some ritual functionaries employed at the temple and *sādhus* present there at the time appreciated the young woman’s (and her entourage’s) interest in the site and her religious dedication. According to the movement’s publications, they even seem to have “tested” Gururani asking about auspicious dates for future ritual events, a test that she apparently passed with flying colors, as the very same dates as the ones indicated by her were calculated later on the basis of the *pañcāṅga* calendar.²⁴ The 2011 brochure includes a

²² Vania (1985: n.p.). According to the same text, among the crowd that attended the ritual events at Ambarnath was also the family of Jimmy Yogiraj, the young boy whom Gururani later designated as the movement’s co-leader and her successor (around 1980).

²³ The Ambarnath Śiva temple was built in the Shilahara period and completed around 1060. On Ambarnath, see Kanitkar (2013).

²⁴ Ambarnath śiv mandir ke sādhak bhī kumārī nargis mīnū se honevāle yajña-jaśnā ke liye śubh muhūrt pūchā karte the / kumārī nargis mīnū jo dīn batātī thīṃ, pañcāṅg meṃ vahī śubh dīn nikaltā thā (*Journal* 2011: 47).

large number of photographs showing Gururani at Ambarnath, alone or in the presence of religious specialists affiliated with the temple, sitting near a sacrificial fire pit or standing in front of the temple entrance surrounded by a group of devotees. Some of the images are again clearly staged and meant to be particularly expressive, depicting a sari-clad Gururani leaning relaxed against the temple wall in different poses, hands behind her back or with an elbow propped on a lintel with century-old sculptures, bedecked with heavy flower garlands, gazing meaningfully and slightly upward into the distance. At other times, her eyes are lowered and she appears bashful and inward-looking.

A Brief Assessment

In the mid-1980s Gururani still works in the same office. In the meantime, however, she has become the focal figure of a large, religiously diverse group. She is regarded as a divine incarnation, but is also something like a freelance religious specialist with a wide-ranging religio-spiritual expertise, and an urban ascetic. In the brochure from 1985, the first publication of the Satguru Gururani Association founded three years earlier, its president describes Gururani as “Paramishwari: the fountain source of everything that was, that is, and that will be, ever-present, ever-conscious, all-pervasive, omnipresent, and omniscient, the Satguru: the World Teacher” (Gandhi 1985: n.p.). In the years to come, as written and oral testimonies have it, she regularly performs *pūjās*, *yajñas* and even image consecrations (*pratiṣṭhās*) at the houses of her Hindu devotees, and visits fire temples with the Zoroastrian ones. Her followers praise her simple life and her inexhaustible energy in all these years: She cleans her flat herself, eats very little, and runs in the early years the grand mission of world salvation “single-handedly.”²⁵

From the 1980s onwards she is joined by her designated heir, Jimmy, who is gradually established as co-leader and co-divinity. An inner circle of two or three dozen highly committed (mostly middle-class and Parsi) followers of Gururani contribute decisively to building up a communicational framework and crafting a core message, disseminated through yearly publications and regular large *darśans*. The message is both plausible and attractive to a wide spectrum of potential participants: It presents Gururani as a figure with extraordinary capacities who helps her religiously diverse followers cope with individual-biographical contingencies by praying and performing

²⁵ This is an expression often used by long-time and close devotees of Gururani.

spiritual practices in relative seclusion and around the clock, accumulating thus karmic capital that her devotees can avail themselves of in times of need, but which they have to “repay” by leading a morally irreproachable life and following faithfully the tenets of their own religious tradition. Around this core message revolves a discursive space of a remarkably low density, characterized by textual, ritual, and performative repetitiveness, an effective combination of minimal doses of doctrine, visually striking and religiously eclectic iconographic material, and the bundling of plurireligious synergies. Through a skilful arrangement and management of culturally varied signifiers a new communicative context arises, in which existing religious affiliations and affinities are affirmed or deepened, and at the same time diverted and channelled toward the charismatic leader. From the 1980s onwards the movement grows slowly but steadily, numbering in the 2010s perhaps 3–4000 (predominantly Hindu) followers, many of whom have been attending Gururani’s and Jimmy’s monthly *darśans* regularly over the last two decades. As such, it is a low-scale²⁶ but nonetheless vigorous voice in the cultural polyphony of the megalopolis that is Mumbai, and it remains to be seen in which direction the movement will evolve in the coming years when it enters its postcharismatic stage.²⁷

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²⁶ See Copeman and Ikegame (2005: 5) on the analogy between the majority of publicly less visible Indian spiritual leaders and local economies.

²⁷ This chapter reflects the situation in 2015. Gururani passed away in April 2021. With Jimmy now the sole leader, a passage of the text on a double-page spread published by the group in the *Parsi Times* of 15 May 2021 reassures the devotees that “since Both Divine Lights are the same Holy power on Mother Earth, all those disciples and devotees and their families who obtain Divine blessings of SRI PAAK JIMMY (YOGIRAJ) shall obtain complete and eternal Divine blessings of Both Divine Lights.”

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