Paper
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Spectacle and Spectatorship in MSG – *The Messenger* (2015)

Sometime in January of 2015, the impossible happened. The Indian intelligentsia, notorious for its inability to arrive at a consensus, rallied in unison for a censor ban on the film *MSG-Messenger of God.* This was a curious incident, for the intelligentsia has historically been on the other side of the censorship debate. When the film was eventually released, following an intervention by the ruling BJP and the resignation of the CBFC chairperson, critics' reviews were equally scathing. A reviewer in the Times of India wrote, "As you watch the saint revel in his fantasy-filled heroics for over three hours, strutting in atrocious clothing and modified cars, you are appalled by his narcissism."[i] The Hindu called it "a long, very long promotional video."[ii]

The two primary critiques against *MSG* are distilled in these reviews. The film makes no pretence to a plot; it is all spectacle at the expense of narrative. That in itself is hardly enough to justify a complete ban. The second review levels a more serious charge of propaganda. The censor board was clear in its statement – Had the film been driven by a star like Hrithik Roshan, *MSG* would have been passed without any controversy. Unlike a Hrithik Roshan, whose star power derives from the film medium itself, Ram Rahim's popularity was founded on his identity as a religious leader of the Dera Sacha Sauda cult. When almost every frame of the film is saturated with the guru's image, can the gullible devotee distinguish between the real godman and his mediated image onscreen?

It would be a mistake to judge the reception of *MSG* solely by these sentiments. Devotees of the guru flocked to theatres. Many of these viewers were on both sides of the screen, having acted as extras in their guru's film. *MSG* holds the dubious record of using the maximum number of extras in a movie. As we will soon see, such eccentric record-making is a tested publicity stunt organised by the DSS. The point isn't whether this claim is valid but that the phenomenon had reached a critical mass where it could no longer be safely ignored as marginal.

The civil society had failed to take stock of this development in 2015. The decade to come would show that this neglect was costly. In these 10 years, propagandist movies that tingle religious and nationalist sentiments have become mainstream. Such films have directly incited or served as justification for violence along communal lines. If there was a consensus in 2015 that such explicit propaganda was, at its worst, laughable, now critics maintain a more guarded tone when discussing films like Chhava (Laxman Utekar, 2025). With *Chhava,* Vicky Kaushal expands his oeuvre of playing military roles (Uri, 2019; Sam Bahadur, 2023), but this is the first time the warrior figure is depicted as a religious figure. To unpack the loaded term of 'propaganda', it is necessary to shed light on an alternative modality of film viewing that was at work during the reception of *MSG*. It would be apt to situate propaganda in Cinema within a broader media landscape.

Let us gather a few threads from the introductory paragraphs that will slowly unravel as this paper progresses. How accurate is the anxiety about the spectator being open to manipulation, the sole point that justifies the presence of censorship institutions? Secondly, we examine how this duality of reception indicates a broader political conflict surrounding the concept of the nation. Thirdly, we interrogate the simplistic narrative-spectacle binary imposed on film. This paper explores why the modality of the spectacle, as opposed to narrative cohesion, has proven to be very effective for leaders of the contemporary, religious, or otherwise.

But first, a few words on the guru himself. Ram Rahim is a verbose individual, so it would be a crime not to introduce him in his own words. "Some call me Sant, some call me Farishta." Ram Rahim's voiceover lets us know in the trailer of *MSG*. "Some call me guru, some call me Bhagwan." All the while, the viewer is subjected to a collage of outlandish Bollywood-inspired fight scenes. This action-hero figuration of the guru is at odds with what he claims next, "But I'm only an insaan (human)." If one thinks that donning so many roles would be a laborious task, they are in for a surprise. Ram Rahim is also a rockstar and a fashion icon, justifying epithets like "Pop Guru" and "Guru of Bling."

This citational form is present throughout the film. His introductory scene depicts him breaking free from an ice formation in a heavenly abode and responding

to the prayers of his devotees on earth. The sequence has affinities with televised devotional serials. "The MSG series innovatively combined the mythological and feature film genres of Indian cinema", note Jacob Copeman and Kunal Duggal.[iii] It does so by referencing Amitabh Bachchan's run in *Agneepath,* the gestures of Shah Rukh Khan and even the "Main Samay hoon" sequence in BR Chopra's televised *Mahabharat*. It is pointless to continue with such references, considering each scene can be read as quoting something else. If the film appears derivative, that is because citation is a deliberate aesthetic strategy.


Ram Rahim as Guru Govind Singh

In 2007, long before his venture into film, Ram Rahim courted controversy for dressing up as the revered Sikh Guru Govind Singh at a public congregation. This time, his quoting of a popular figure was considered desecration. We notice that Ram Rahim's guruship is performative at its core. He seeks to expand existing pools of cultural knowledge, but there is a double movement here. Just as Ram Rahim's image is associated with a variety of improbable roles, such as Guru Govind Singh, Amitabh Bachchan, Michael Jackson, and a vigilante superhero figure like Krrish, it becomes increasingly

difficult to pin him down to any fixed notion of personhood.

One is reminded of the Mukkala Muqabla song sequence in *Kadhalan* (S. Shankar -1994). The sequence is a hilarious take on the Western genre and the figure of the cowboy. Prabhu Deva, dressed in ill-fitting cowboy attire, dances in a setting reminiscent of a Texan salon when a group of attackers descend on him. As bullets pierce his body in close-up, the dancer's head, hands and legs vanish into thin air. An invisible phantom body, still donning the cowboy attire, continues the dance nonchalantly. The body becomes a site of inscription, the "outside" of the clothes signifying the "inside" of the physical body that has disappeared. As with *Mukkala Muqabla's* reference to the Western genre, Ram Rahim employs impersonation as a strategy by stripping these identities of their original context. His use of the image, in turn, becomes a resignification—linking the signifier to a new domain of the signified.

Andreas Huyssen, speaking about the postmodern condition, talks of a time when the past was stored as information in the form of codes. "Form and images are now stored for instant recall in the computerised memory banks of our culture."[iv] The postmodern can thus reference the past without attaching itself to tradition. The postmodern film is ultimately an endless quoting of existing styles, which only surface with no depth. Having picked up that insight, let us take a fresh look at Ram Rahim's diverse personalities. The familiar images of Bachchan, Guru Govind Singh and Michael Jackson are all data points in a more extensive cultural database. Consider how a computer

user interacts with a website, where data is spatially scattered and connected by numerous links. There is no single linear process by which the data can be accessed. Instead, the users become co-authors when they navigate through this data collection in their way. The paradigmatic choices are laid out before the user, while the syntagm becomes dematerialised and virtual. The narrative becomes just one way of accessing data, among many. As the literal author of the film, Ram Rahim takes the viewer on a tour through his database of wonders.
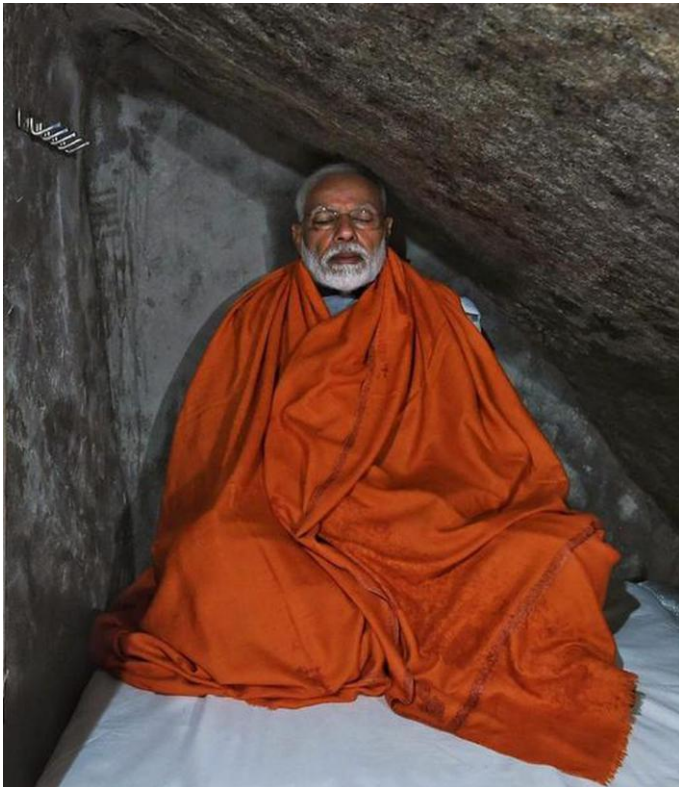
Ram Rahim's multiplicity of persona strongly parallels the Indian political scene. During the COVID lockdown, a photo of Narendra Modi meditating in a Kedarnath cave circulated. Clad in the saffron of an ascetic, the Indian Prime Minister was consciously positing himself as a guru. This was a dangerous but expected shift, for did the followers of Modi not already identify as bhakts? The figure of the guru was always a part of the more prominent Modi myth. This image allowed him to position himself as "in the world, but not of it."[v] Emboldened by the success of this experiment, Modi would later pitch himself as a non-biological entity, a godman (or God?) predestined to be the supreme leader of Hindus. We find a typical pattern emerging. By the sheer amount of information-driven home by repetition in the media, both Ram Rahim and Modi consciously efface any sense of their "real" selves. For Modi, this is enhanced because there is no concrete account of his life before he entered politics. The totalitarian leader emerges as someone who holds multiple identities without contradiction. Since the identities they slip into are already well-established in the cultural sphere, there is already a valid claim to such impersonation. We began this section with a reference to postmodernism and empty styles. It would be fitting to conclude with another philosophical provocation. Can the guru figure be considered an "assemblage" in the sense that Deleuze and Guattari use it? That discussion falls beyond the scope of this paper, but those interested can consult David Landau and Nina Rageth's essay, "Governing with a Lockdown Beard."

The film begins with a narration that draws attention to Ram Rahim's social welfare activities. His campaigns against drug addiction have been so successful that international drug rings conspire to put him out of the way. That is, more or less, the flimsy narrative that serves as a vehicle for three hours of relentless spectacle. There is also a documentary impulse to the film. Episodes of the guru's social welfare activities, such as blood donation camps and tree plantation drives, are designed to emulate

actual drives organised by the guru. These mass drives are couched in the rhetoric of "wonder". The eccentric world records mentioned earlier are employed for this purpose. DSS claims it holds records for the world's most significant blood donation and hand sanitisation drives. A 3-day concert organised at the DSS headquarters in Sirsa, Haryana, is also part of the film. To participate in such a drive is to be part of this organised spectacle while contributing to the guru's aura as the figure who makes this spectacle possible. Readers will recall the earlier suggestion that *MSG* can be viewed as a database of these "acts of wonder." Cinema becomes a "medium" in the true sense; it allows the passive spectator to identify with his image in the crowd and imagine himself as a part of this larger whole. Ram Rahim's intense media presence across photography, film, and the digital has led to him being called a "camerawork guru," a mediatised figure who makes possible a "devotion of attractions."[vi] The latter draws from Tom Gunning's conceptual framework of a "cinema of attractions" that looks at early film spectators' engagement with the moving image.

Gunning describes the Cinema of attractions as "a cinema that displays its visibility, willing to rupture a self-enclosed fictional world for a chance to solicit the spectator's attention."[vii] Overturning the earlier classification of early film based on the Lumiere and Melies traditions, Gunning argues that the desire for narrative was subordinate to the spectacle of motion. *MSG*'s rejection of a coherent narrative, its relentless directness and its reliance on spectacle make

it clear that early film can be a suitable entry point into its modality of viewing.

William Mazzarella, writing on obscenity and the public punctum, draws on the Hicklin test, often referenced in legal discourse.[viii] The test is based on the vague notion of an image's 'tendency' to corrupt those susceptible to it. In opposition to the optical mode of viewing that requires a certain distance between viewer and image, the more intimate haptic viewing can create an "arrested viewer" immersed in the image. Mazzarella refers to Roland Barthes' distinction of the studium and punctum in photography. The studium is the conventional, dominant interpretation of an image, while the punctum is a rupture in this fabric of meaning. Shorn of the need to interpret, something in the photographic image "pricks" the viewer and holds them in its charm. In the tricky terrain of obscenity, the studium and punctum collide.[ix] In other words, the image has no meaning but excessive visuality.

The censorship argument, with roots in colonial definitions of obscenity, is very much a civil society argument. The susceptible arrested viewers, "a crowd of pissing men" in Mazzarella's formulation, are seen as incapable of discerning the guru's film image from reality. In contrast, as Copeman and Duggal's research suggests, the intended viewers of the film have their mechanism of interpreting and relating to the presence of their guru on screen. In "The Total Guru", the authors draw from conversations with devotee viewers to suggest that "while they remained fully aware that the miracles depicted are not real, the film nonetheless

augments an atmosphere of miracles and wonder around the person of the guru." [x]

The narrative also echoes the egalitarian claims of the Dera, which are open and inclusive as long as one accepts the authority of the Dera chief. Despite the ease with which DSS navigates the New Media landscape, one must remember that it is rooted in a more extended history of cult formation in the region. These sects or deras existed on the margins, both geographically and socially, and offered an alternative to the stranglehold of Brahminism. Often situated at the borders of inhabited civilian localities, the deras and mathas provided a space for religious practice and education to lower-caste people. Conversely, other studies have argued how, despite their claims of egalitarianism, the sects soon internalised the hierarchy they sought to rebel against.[xi] Significant support for the DSS comes from land-owning upper-caste agrarian families in Haryana and Punjab. The film goes to great lengths to foreground the diversity of its followers. In a sequence involving a plot on the guru's life, a few members of the Hijra community foil the attack. In another sequence, a smug journalist asks the guru why his noble teachings cannot reach out to the whole of Hindustan. The response to this question is a montage sequence where older adults, children, disabled individuals, men and women across classes and castes walk to the Dera to participate in a tree plantation drive. The implicit desire is for the Dera to expand to an interchangeable formation with the Nation-State.

We now return to a concern this paper began with - the confrontation of the modern Nation-state with its feudal 'Other'. Partha Chatterjee's distinction of political and civil societies becomes relevant here. He notes that civil societies in postcolonial India are entrenched in notions of colonial Modernity and its institutions. These civil social institutions – the university, the judiciary, the media, among others – created the "ideal citizen" subject position with a critical, rational and scientific temper. The unit of civil society is the enlightened individual. Yet, the moment we unpack such a definition, we see traces of elitism and exclusion. Civil society had relied on the pedagogic power of institutions to reach the end of an ideal democracy entrenched in the values of Western Modernity. Another relationship between the State and its citizens was being formulated simultaneously, reaching a far greater number of people in a shorter time. As Chatterjee calls it, this "political society" takes as its unit sections of the population that are "differentiated but classifiable, describable and enumerable."[xii] The government now no longer functions on the logic of universal rights but on one of welfare. The actualisation of this conceptual category can be seen in political parties with a loyal base and the face of a leader. Chatterjee notes an emerging conflict between Modernity and democracy. One possible arena of this conflict would be the Censor Board-DSS clash. The feudal formation so familiar in the Indian context had seamlessly passed to this new political society, and the dream of liberal democracy had already started to look dangerously like majoritarianism. In a similar vein, Derrida speaks of a democracy to come where the superficial distinction of the secular and religious is erased.[xiii]

More than anything, the eclectic miracles performed in MSG were a scandal in the eyes of secular modernity. This anxiety that supposes an indoctrinatory tendency in the affective image hides a more pertinent question – how does religion function in the new media age? Marshal McLuhan anticipates this question in "Medium is the message" when he notes, "Electric speed mingles the cultures of prehistory with the dregs of industrial marketers, the nonliterate with the semiliterate and postliterate."[xiv] McLuhan arrives here by interrogating the Rationalist European perception shaped by the predominance of visuality—a rational culture, much like the machine's logic, champions sequentiality. In contrast, electricity makes sequence obsolete by making things instantaneous. The logic of the electrical is thus a disruption to Western rationality, which is also the founding principle of the modern secular nation-state. Lev Manovich extends the argument and connects it to the speed made possible by new Media. If narrative was the symbolic form of rational Modernity, its equivalent in the New Media age is the database.[xv] The narrative-spectacle binary, rather than being seen as a parameter of quality, should be placed within the frames of this broader shift in perception.

The crowd watches as their guru performs a miracle

The spectacle emerges as a convenient persuasion tool because it holds immense affective power. Early Cinema revels in its desire to "show"; it is no surprise that the earliest representations of gods on the Indian screen were met with awe and reverence. That history goes back further before the film, with portrait photography enabling figures like Swami Vivekananda and Ramakrishna to enter the domestic ritual space. Conceptually, it is possible to trace that thread further backwards to images of gods on calendars and other mass-produced prints. This has special significance in India, where the idea of 'darshan' has been a strong frame for engaging with the history of seeing. To be in God's image is an act of devotion; it is a mutual exchange of glances between the deity and the devotee. In line with the notion that new technologies inaugurate new regimes of vision, Anne Friedberg talks of a "televisual subjectivity" engendered by the coming of this apparatus.[xvi] Much is written on the television broadcast of the Ramayana and Mahabharata serials in the 1980s and the politics surrounding it. Gurus like Baba Ramdev emerged out of a television context. Srirupa Bhattacharya draws our attention to how the early televised yoga sessions of Ramdev helped foster an incorporeal community of followers who would prove to be highly significant when the baba eventually took a more direct religious turn.[xvii] It is then commonsensical that current propaganda films be seen not within an isolated history of Cinema but within the networked discourse of digital cultures. Only then can we meaningfully engage with why films like *Chhava* spill beyond the screen and lead to sporadic activism in the real world? Here, I remember the recent news that fans of the film, driven by a plot point in *Chhava*,

ransacked a village in Madhya Pradesh to scour for Mughal-era treasure.[xviii]

Films like *Chhava* mobilise the crowd differently. Here, more than scenes in the film text, social media wastes no time circulating fan groups' affective reactions within the theatre. These films have a more coherent narrative, for unlike *MSG,* their political power derives from a more direct good-and-evil binary. That being acknowledged, they also use the spectacle's immense affective power. An example of this kind would be the extended torture scene of Shambhaji in *Chhava.* This scene has led to multiple media events, like a fan tearing off the screen in agony when it played.[xix] In another incident, a group of young men were forced to kneel and apologise for having laughed at the scene in theatres.[xx] Here, the image of the crowd emerges as a threat to anyone who dissents from the dominant interpretation of the film. As mentioned before, the crowd on the two sides of the screen in *MSG* were, by and large, the same. As a militant cult, the DSS's use of the crowd image is also a show of strength. It is a warning that this mass can be unleashed as a military force at the guru's command.

Ram Rahim as military saviour

In January 2017, the guru entered one of his satsangs in an army tank dressed in full military regalia. This alignment with the army rhetoric, also championed by the BJP,

followed the news of his impending arrest on the charge of rape. He was campaigning for the 3rd film of the MSG franchise, pointedly called "Hind ke napak ko jawab" (An answer to those who defile Hind). Shortly after, members of the cult organised violent protests in North India. Images of lethal riots, burnt vehicles and arsenals of weapons uncovered from the DSS premises came as a shock to civil society, which was yet to come to terms with its short-sightedness. The potential implicit in the image of the crowd had actualised.

While riots failed to stall the arrest, the physical imprisonment of the guru led to a greater exaltation of his mediated image. The digital became an archive where the wonders of Ram Rahim could be accessed.[xxi] It is not coincidental that several of these video sermons were screened in satsangs in the physical absence of the guru. The spectators who had earlier thronged the theatres returned to the film and read back elements into it. For example, a scene involving the plight of devotees as the guru leaves their company is now interpreted as prophetic of his actual departure. This new engagement happened on YouTube and social media platforms.

MSG makes abundant use of VFX in the action sequences, showing the godman one miracle after another. This is inconsistent with Dera's teachings to be suspicious of any miracle worker as a fraud and Ram Rahim's humble claims of humanness. The paper wants to use this apparent inconsistency to make a final journey to Hent de Vries' philosophical take on special effects as the modern form of miracle. The power of magic and the ability to perform miracles has a long history in religious conversions. The

experience of the miracle was supposedly a revelation of divine power whose intervention allowed the miracle to take place.

In contrast, the dictionary defines special effects as illusory effects introduced into a motion picture during processing. However, the act of the miracle itself depended on technical skill and mechanical.[xxii] Does the special effect resemble the miracle only formally, or is there a phenomenological basis for this resemblance? DeVries asks. The notion of 'medium' is already implied in the concept of the miracle. The word, taken literally, a medium is an entity that allows one to enter a reality otherwise inaccessible. That is the role of the human medium during a planchette. Following that logic, whether a miracle is a "real" act is of no concern. The miracle exists on an alternate plane of reality. As with the physical performance of the godman, film is only a medium, a conduit, between these two planes.

The project of Modernity sought to efface religion from civil and political lives and keep it limited within the bounds of cultural practice. This results in a superficial opposition of science-technology and religion-superstition. By presupposing a symbiotic relationship between technology and religion, DeVries reveals the fault lines at the heart of this binary. In his reading, the "return of the religious" in the discourse of the Nation-State is a natural development in line with the rise of information technology and new forms of telecommunication. Drawing from Derrida, he writes on the need "to re-conceptualise the notion of 'religion' in light of the current development of the newest 'media', especially the multifaceted relations,

or more precisely, interface – between them."[xxiii] He highlights "the significance of the processes of mediation and mediatisation without and outside of which no religion would be able to manifest or reveal itself in the first place."[xxiv]

One only has to look at the intersection of right-wing majoritarian politics around the globe and its strategic use of social media to understand the gravity of this statement. Be it Hindutva, ISIS, or the MAGA movement in America, religious fundamentalist formations today create consensus by continuous staging of media events as spectacles. "Devotion of attractions", a term we have looked at in detail, can help interpret this network of religion, politics and media. *MSG* has been used as a stage to draw attention to relevant conversations around censorship, the potent political power of the spectacle, and ideological conflicts vying for alternate definitions of the Nation-State. Harking back to older films also allows the privilege of hindsight. The rear-view mirror first shows us the horrible failure of old civil society rhetorics to anticipate its displacement from the centre of the national discourse. After all, the dizzying speed and constant transformation that characterise New Media already imply the failure of any rational, linear framework to comprehend it. A media object in the digital is infinitely mutable to the point it obfuscates any notion of an objective truth. Yet, pursuing truth is at the heart of institutions like the free press and judiciary. Further, the scientific rigour embedded in their structure demands slowness. While we are yet to know what will emerge from this ongoing tussle, it seems that the legacy of colonial Modernity and its institutions will

become irrelevant in days to come. If the future is indeed fascist, then the pressing need of the moment should be to understand the viral image, the spectacle that sustains contemporary politics.

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