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'Mass Castration', Mechanical Devotion? Slavery, Surgery and *As-If* Devotion in a North Indian Guru Movement

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Abstract

This essay examines mass castration allegations within the North Indian guru movement Dera Sacha Sauda. Drawing on court records, public commentary, and prior fieldwork, it traces how surgical procedures served as a mechanism of enforced proximity and devotional binding. Castration here functions less as renunciation than as anatomical control within a system of engineered devotion that sutures followers into machinic forms of loyalty. The essay situates these acts within a broader politics of sacrificial excess, linking them to *hijra* initiation, Mughal-coded sovereignty, and strategies of masculine containment. What emerges is a devotional regime of irreversible subtraction and a sovereignty staged through ritual overreach.

Keywords: castration; devotional exorbitance; masculinity; guru sovereignty; mechanical loyalty; sacrificial politics

1. Introduction

In the last decade, scholars have increasingly begun to address the sexual violation of devotees by gurus (e.g., McCartney 2018; Lucia 2018; Jain 2020). Such studies make the important point that the question of a devotee's 'consent' will always be 'complicated by the power dynamics inherent to the guru-disciple relationship' (Lucia 2018, p. 982). There also exists a more longstanding literature on how gurus have enacted other forms of violence upon their disciples, including beatings, demands for self-sacrifice and even murder (e.g., Gold 1987; Voix 2008), which is largely separate from the former, though the 'extreme authoritarianism' (McCartney 2018) of the guru-devotee relationship is central to both. This essay brings together two lines of enquiry—on sexual violation and on authoritarian forms of devotional violence—that are rarely considered in tandem.[1] In doing so, it traces a distinct manifestation of the corporeal-sacrificial nature of devotion, namely, allegations that a present-day all-powerful guru ordered the castration (by medics) of at least 400 of his closest male devotees, mainly in the sterile environment of a 'super specialty hospital' founded by the guru himself. The guru in question—Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Ji Insan—heads the Dera Sacha Sauda (DSS), a spiritual organisation based in Sirsa, Haryana, that is situated within north India's lineage-based devotional milieu, where the guru is both object and orchestrator of absolute devotion, drawing on older traditions of *sant* poetry, mystical practice, and the embodied transmission of divine authority.[2] The DSS denies the allegations.

The involvement of gurus in less overtly violent practices, such as mass blood donation campaigns, also often rests on expectations and assumptions of the guru's corporeal control over devotees and their automatic assent (Copeman 2009). The devotee's body is

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at stake in both *guru-bhakti* (guru devotion) and *guru-seva* (service to the guru). Consider the standpoint of the comparatively benign figure of Sai Baba of Shirdi, who 'insisted that *seva* to the guru, for example, massage, should be undertaken in the spirit of surrendering one's body, and not rendering a service, as that body is already the master's' (Beckerlegge 2015, p. 211).[3] With the idea of the devotee's body as always already belonging to the guru equally present in those forms of *seva* that embody a shift from traditional *guru-seva* to forms that are ostensibly more humanitarian, reformist, and socially progressive, the guru's claim of ownership over devotee bodies can also facilitate and rationalise extraordinary levels of cruelty and mistreatment. For instance, a *sadhvi* (female ascetic) raped by the very guru whose authority lies at the centre of this essay reports how, at their very first private meeting, 'Maharaj [the guru] took me in his arms and said that he loved me from the core of his heart. He also said that he wanted to make love to me. He told me that at the time of becoming his disciple, *I had dedicated my wealth, body and soul to him and he had accepted my offering. By this logic, your body and soul are mine now*, he said. When I objected, he said, "There is no doubt that I am God." When I asked if God also indulged in such acts, he shot back: (1) Sri Krishna too was God and he had 360 *gopis* [milkmaids] with whom he staged Prem Leela [Love Drama].[4] Even then people regarded him as God. This is not a new thing. (2) I can kill you with this revolver and cremate you here. The members of your family are my devoted followers and they have such blind faith in me that *they are my slaves*. You know very well that your family members cannot go against me' (Tripathi 2018, emphasis added).

Proceeding from this, when one thinks of sexual violence perpetrated by Indic gurus, it is women and girls who come to mind as the primary targets of abuse, which is reasonable because they are. It follows that they would be the principal reference point in key studies of guru abuse (e.g., Jain 2020, p. 104), which often feature accounts of 'the sexually predatory male Indian guru' (Lucia 2018, p. 982) and his vulnerable female devotees. But they are not the only targets. Less attention has been paid to sexual violence enacted by gurus against men and boys.[5] While this disparity reflects differences in scale and reporting, it is important not to leave unexplored or unexplained any form of sexual abuse. Of particular significance in the cases discussed here is that this variety of abuse obviously extinguishes male devotees' reproductive capacity. Indeed that, in the present case, appears to have been precisely the point. This essay examines how and why the guru imposed the practice of castration, situates it alongside other forms of bodily devotion in South Asia, and interprets it through the lens of the extreme authoritarianism of the guru-devotee relationship. It also draws on literature on New Religious Movements (NRMs), particularly work on how these movements manage exit and regulate sexual ties to the guru—dynamics that, I suggest, are central to understanding the logic of 'mass castration' in the context discussed here.

Reflecting the oft-noted association between NRMs and guruship in South Asia (Srinivas 2019), this essay builds on existing work that emphasises enabling conditions and social context: the potential for physical and sexual abuse is built into many guru-based devotional settings in significant ways (Lucia 2018). Yet it remains necessary to ask why one of the forms of abuse in this case was castration; that is, to apprehend the specific logics and fantasies that underwrite it. These, I argue, draw on a merging of Hindu ascetic traditions, Mughal fantasy, slavery, and polygyny (with its attendant problem of 'excess men'). Castration here produces a form of *as if* loyalty or devotion: commitment ensured by surgical means. Connectedly, the phrase 'mechanical devotion', as used here, refers not to the dehumanisation of devotees but to a mode of engineered fidelity in which affective commitment is socially and medically secured. Castration becomes a mechanism of devotional guarantee, converting affect into bodily infrastructure and scripting a version of loyalty through irreversible subtraction.

Unlike most studies of castration, which emphasise either the trustworthiness it is supposed to produce and signal or the 'religious fervour' said to generate it, this essay examines a case where both dynamics are critical. It argues that the guru sought, through these surgeries, to establish a form of masculine power that was both *exclusive*—through the removal of potential rivals—and, in occult terms, *accumulative*: extracting and reincorporating their vitality. It is necessary, then, to attend both to the social conditions that enabled these offences (Lucia 2018, p. 955) and to the forms they took. Neither on its own is sufficient to account for a case that so forcefully demands the question: why? Crucially, the essay suggests that the rapes and the castrations are connected not only as forms of abuse perpetrated by the same guru and enabled by similar conditions. Their linkage also lies in the guru's apparent drive to monopolise reproductive power: to strip others of sexual and spiritual agency while consolidating both for himself. In this sense, castration echoes the violence of rape, but extends and codifies it within a wider project of embodied domination.

2. The Mass Guru: Devotional Exorbitance and Anachronistic Sovereignty

Male devotee-residents of the DSS ashram are known as *sadhu*s (ascetics). Classical concepts of asceticism are at once retained and reformulated in the designation, with *sadhu*s claiming to work eighteen-hour days tilling the fields, writing and publishing the organisation's newspaper, serving at the organisation's petrol pump or restaurant, or engaged in other labours. They wear plain, non-saffron clothes, many donning cockney-style flat caps. There seemed, during my early fieldwork on the movement, very little visually to link them with classical representations and definitions of the *sadhu*. They had, however, left their families to live in the ashram—an archetypal Indian ascetic requirement—and further, the claim to work eighteen-hour days appears to be a kind of practical analogue of the feats of endurance associated with classical renouncers. Indeed, in earlier work I termed them 'practical *sadhu*s': renouncers whose activities in certain ways corresponded to Swami Vivekananda's call for a Practical Vedanta, which 'propagates an ethical and social application of the *advaita vedanta*' (Hellman 1996, p. 241) and stresses the supremacy of action as worship.[6] At the same time, since such an emphasis on 'hard work' owes something to contemporary notions of the good subject of capitalism, we see how DSS ascetic conceptions draw upon multiple fields of meaning. Though fieldwork was not attempted on the difficult, extremely sensitive topics explored here, the essay is informed by my prior fieldwork on the movement, which has been conducted in Sirsa, Delhi and Chandigarh intermittently since 2004. The principal sources drawn upon are court records, newspaper commentary, and other elements of public culture.

As a *guru-bhakti* movement that also forms part of the social reformist *sant* heritage of north India, which began to emerge in the medieval period, the DSS is in some sense an 'old' religious movement. Yet since this particular branch was only founded in 1948—and given that its current head, who has transformed it almost beyond recognition, acceded to the guruship in 1990—it is also clearly a 'new' religious movement (NRM).[7] This doubled 'old-new' character features prominently in much of the commentary it provokes. Indeed, it is an NRM that can appear to mock 'new India' (Dawson Varughese 2012). Commenting on the violent clashes between police and devotees that took place in Panchkula in 2017—after the guru's conviction on charges of raping *sādhvīs* (female ascetics) living in his *dera*, and which left 36 devotees dead—a plaintive comment in the *r/India* reddit forum put it succinctly: 'Feels like old r/India'. Similar sentiments were visible in media responses to the castration allegations at the centre of this essay. For instance, below the line of a *Times of India* report headlined 'Mass castration: Dera Sacha Sauda chief Gurmeet Ram Rahim charge-sheeted', one comment read: 'Gurmeet Ram Rahim [the guru] has singlehandedly

taken the reputation of our country 500 years back into the past. These babas are doing us a great injustice' (Sura 2018b).

Elite disapproval of the DSS—framed as a vulgar medieval residue and obstacle to development—positions the movement as an 'old' new religious movement. Yet it has also been figured as novel precisely in the contemporaneity of its 'feudalism' (Cohen 2008). Such disapproval is often expressed 'more in sadness than in anger', and accompanied by a scattering of downcast emojis: 'this is why education is more important in our country 😟'; 'Such people have no place in developing India'; 'India cannot develop till the time these babas have unnecessary control or influence on Hindus and politics of the nation'; 'Is this 21st century India??'; 'Damn it what will be the future of India 😔'. While the media and consumer cultures through which the DSS has thrived are unmistakably part of the twenty-first century, comments such as these cast it as belonging to a different temporal register. This contradiction gives the movement its curiously enigmatic epochal location.

While castration as a form of extreme asceticism is by no means unprecedented—and there is a long tradition of violence directed toward male genitalia in Hindu ascetic traditions (consider the ritual of *tang-tor* among Ramanandi sadhus (van der Veer 1988, p. 121), *hijras* or 'third gender' eunuchs as ascetics (Reddy 2005, p. 155; Cohen 2004, p. 189), and, further afield, the Russian Skoptsy (Engelstein 1997) and Spain's Palmarian Church (Lundberg 2020))—such practices remain extremely rare within contemporary guru movements and ascetic communities. What was more unequivocally unusual, or original, in the DSS case was the scale of the charges: their very mass bespoke a kind of newness.

On one hand, this excess can obscure its continuities with older forms—archetypal sacrifices to gurus drawn from the epics, and the countless other instances of gurus seizing and hollowing out the bodies of their devotees. From this perspective, there is little that is novel about the disintegration of devotee bodies under the imprimatur of guru-authority. On the other hand, the sheer scale of the DSS case marks a rupture.[8] It was precisely this—the image of the mass operation—that contemporary reportage seized upon, with headlines such as: 'Dera's old printing press, hospitals used for mass castration: CBI [Central Bureau of Investigation]', 'The alleged mass castrations—The other Dera horror that needs scrutiny', and 'Ram Rahim's top aides without testes, may confirm mass castrations in Dera' (Gupta 2017, 2018; India Today 2015).

Such excess and massification was of a piece with the general exorbitance of the DSS guru: a veritable guru of the mass. Seemingly capable of speaking only through mass events and gestures, he had already entered the world of mass media and entertainment in the forms of pop star, film star, and fashion icon[9] — creatively deploying the mass devotee body to surpass a range of 'humanitarian' world records, including feats of mass medical intervention such as large-scale blood donation to public banks. All of this appeared oriented toward further massifying his constituency. Indeed, several pertinent senses of the word *mass* interlock in depictions of the guru and his followers. In line with negative accounts of mass democracy (Williams 1976), mass devotion is portrayed in many commentaries as a religious system governed by gurus directing those seen as too uninstructed or ignorant to possess independent preferences or political judgement. As with *mass taste*, a certain vulgarity is taken to attach to practitioners of such collective programmes.

Another key sense—*mass produced*—invokes Fordist or Taylorist assembly-line production. This usage resonates with a longstanding feature of the Indian medical landscape, where assembly-line techniques have been used to deliver healthcare at scale—a strategy often justified as a way to 'treat the mass in its entirety' (Cohen 2011a, p. 125). More simply, *mass* may denote either 'a solid aggregate' or 'a very large number of things or people' (Williams 1976, p. 195). The phrase *mass castration* partakes most obviously of the latter, with a striking number of devotees alleged to have undergone the procedure.

At the same time, it conjures the sense of assembly-line production, even if it is the guru's blood donation and treatment events (see Copeman 2009, chapter 5) that more closely resemble that model. It is this orchestration of massness that animates what I call *devotional exorbitance*. The term marks a condition of density, where devotional forms are overloaded with conflicting meanings and demands. Such exorbitance enables sovereign projection while cloaking coercion in gestures of care. It also refers to the movement's refusal to settle into any singular mode, generating a volatility that makes its practices difficult to contain or decode. Devotion, in this framing, becomes a site of accumulation rather than coherence.

DSS devotees, who are predominantly lower caste and class, also correspond to another connotation of *mass*: 'something amorphous and indistinguishable', along with related formulations such as 'many-headed multitude or mob: low, ignorant, unstable' (Williams 1976, pp. 194–95).[10] Such associations no doubt assist in making them more killable—as in the police shootings in Panchkula mentioned earlier—and more mutilatable, as in the guru's apparent eagerness to castrate a section of them. Other senses of *mass* relate to mass politics and mass psychology (Williams 1976). The latter implies a populace that 'see and hear as they are directed by others', a framing that underwrites dominant portrayals of mass devotion, or the mass devotee body, which the guru directs en masse not only toward mass humanitarian feats but also toward electoral mobilisation. His support for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), for instance, surely explains his repeated paroles despite a 20-year sentence for the rape of two *sādhvīs* and a further life term for the murder of a journalist investigating those charges.

Although many of his mass spectacles were novel in scale, if not always in kind, the movement's association with what Williams called 'the older simplicities of contempt' ensured that the guru could never be anything but a guru of *old* India. 'Mass castration', as the headline put it: a kind of record he probably would not wish to claim. News reports ultimately depicted him as a figure of mass abuse.

This image of the guru as a figure of mass culture and abuse intersects with another key formation: the long-standing association in South Asian political and cultural life between sovereign excess and the aesthetics of rule. As I have already implied, the DSS guru is both a figure of populist charisma and a sovereign of devotional exorbitance: a mass guru whose authority and aesthetic frequently borrow from the idiom of Mughal kingship. This connection is central to the analysis that follows. His performances of sovereignty—from self-directed films to choreographed humanitarian spectacles—repeatedly involve Mughal-era costumes, courtly arrangements, and imperial staging. On occasion, the DSS has explicitly claimed resemblance to Mughal traditions (Copeman 2012, p. 164; Chima 2015, p. 153), while the guru himself dons the garments and jewellery of emperors past: a guru with an emperor complex. What this evokes is both a fantastical genealogy and a logic of rule structured by asymmetry and exorbitant display. The Mughals—and especially figures such as Akbar and Shah Jahan—were associated with a form of sovereignty-through-excess, where imperial abundance was made visible through ornamentation, ritual, and monumental architecture (Asher 1992; Koch 2006). As Alam and Subrahmanyam (2012) demonstrate, Mughal kingship was never reducible to consumption or indulgence; it operated instead as a cosmologically anchored aesthetic of power.

This framing becomes all the more significant in the current Hindutva-inflected climate, where anything Mughal-coded is, officially at least, suspect. Modi's references to 'Mughal mindsets', textbook deletions, and the vilification of Muslim opulence are part of a broader political strategy of erasure. Yet the Mughal idiom persists—frequently vilified in official discourse, while continuing to animate registers of fantasy and sovereign allure. Mughal-era splendour retains a strong hold in the popular imaginary, in part due to its long cinematic afterlife and its lingering association with masculine sovereignty and grandeur

(Vasudevan 2011; Dubyanskaya 2013). As Lal (2003, p. 53) observes, postcolonial historiography has remained fascinated by the Mughal achievement, often treating it as a sign of India's historical greatness and cultural autonomy. It is within this ambivalent cultural terrain that the DSS guru positions himself—neither outside Hindutva's symbolic order nor fully compliant with its exclusions. His evocation of a quasi-Islamicate aesthetic of rule is not an aberration but a mode of performative excess, drawing power from anachronistic splendour.[11] Mughal noblemen, it should be remembered, famously held slave-eunuchs (Chatterjee 1999, pp. 44–45). Even if similar practices predate Islamic polities—and non-Muslim nobles held Hindu ones in western and northern India—slave-eunuchs remain popularly associated with Mughal rule, as does the figure of the harem. And it is precisely that connotation which concerns us here.

It is within this volatile convergence of aestheticised sovereignty and Mughal-inflected devotional excess that the DSS castration allegations must be situated. While the precise contours of the guru's power remain elusive—at once theatrical and infrastructural—the body of the male ascetic emerges as a central site of both submission and control. The next section turns to the legal record: an examination of court documents alongside police and medical accounts relating to the castrations. These materials offer the most concrete documentation available concerning the guru's alleged actions and the conditions in which they unfolded. If the preceding section mapped the guru's symbolic positioning as sovereign, here we encounter the procedural textures of his alleged dominion.

3. Castration Accusations

Although the legal case concerning the reported castrations remains unresolved, the Punjab and Haryana High Court found prima facie evidence of the petitioner Hans Raj Chauhan's castration—'[t]he report of the hospital bears out that no testes are present in the scrotum'—and noted police confirmation of seven further cases. A list of 166 additional names was submitted by Human Rights International, reportedly castrated 'at the instance of the 5th respondent [Gurmeet Ram Rahim] on similar promises of scope for attainment of higher spiritual powers' (Punjab-Haryana High Court 2014; Sehgal 2017). The legal question, then, is less whether these surgeries occurred than whether they could plausibly be considered self-willed in this—or any comparable—guru-led devotional context.

The principal public voice behind the accusations, Chauhan, had been a *bhajan* (devotional song) singer at DSS events. In 2012, he filed a Civil Writ Petition requesting a CBI investigation into allegations that the guru had 'caus[ed] grievous injuries of castration to the petitioner and to 400 other males at the Dera Sacha Sauda' (Punjab-Haryana High Court 2014). Chauhan has also spoken to the media about his experiences. In 2014, the High Court of Punjab and Haryana granted his plea. While not a verdict of guilt, the decision endorsed several of the petitioner's claims and offered clarifications with implications beyond the specific case. It records Chauhan's assertion that:

> he had been the inmate since the year 1990 and took the 5th respondent as a spiritual guru and it was only on account of his influence on him that he underwent the surgery of castration and he is now weaned out of his influence and in a position to objectively see the harm to himself. Several other persons who have been similarly castrated continue to remain within the ashram at his *gufa* [residence] and in settlements surrounding the ashram. The petitioner [. . .] has sought the assistance of the lawyers for Human Rights International to espouse his cause since he is himself under threat for his life by the 5th respondent.

Significantly, none of the seven men confirmed by police to be castrated—all of whom, notably, remained DSS devotees at the time of interview—attributed their surgeries directly to the guru. Some cited injury or infection; others invoked the spiritual imperative of *brah-*

macharya, or celibacy, as a precondition for 'dwelling deep in spiritualism', and maintained that they had undergone the procedure willingly, without coercion, and in some cases prior to the current guru's tenure. Nevertheless, the court criticised the state police for failing to pursue the 166 additional leads, implicitly flagging their reluctance to investigate a figure of considerable political reach. It further observed that several of the guru's personal guards, arrested following his conviction and the ensuing violence, had also been medically confirmed as castrated (Sehgal 2017).

The court's decision frames castration as a fundamental violation of human rights (Punjab-Haryana High Court 2014). It draws comparison with female genital mutilation as practised in 'several of African tribes and in some Arab countries', citing UN campaigns for its global eradication. The judgment uses these examples to underline the principle that even *voluntary* surgical privation of reproductive organs is inadmissible. If, in the case of 'TGs who have indescribable agony of being trapped between two sexes', surgery may be understood as a response to profound emotional compulsion, the court finds 'a normal person losing his sexual organ on the belief that he will be spiritually transcended. . . is too poignant for words'. Castration undertaken by 'normally sexed human beings, enticed by promise to salvation or nirvana', cannot be excused on the basis of consent alone. The judgment insists that even if individuals claim to have 'volunteered themselves to such privation', this does not absolve those who perform or enable the surgery. Castration is classed as a form of torture, and under this interpretation, 'there could be no consent to castration for a normal person; [therefore] the performer or abettor commits offence'. As the judgment puts it, 'No doctor nor a spiritual guru take the willingness of a person to be subjected to removal of testicles as coming within the excepted line of defence under *volenti non fit injuria*' (Punjab-Haryana High Court 2014).

The question of consent cannot be separated from the question of influence. Can one truly consent within the authoritarian structure of the guru-devotee relationship? As the Justice puts it: 'It has been laid down in several decisions that a master to a servant or a guru to disciple is in a position of active confidence and a proof of good faith must be placed on the person who is in a position to control the activities of another. In a typical master-disciple situation, it shall be the master who has to explain that there was no undue influence practiced. On the other hand, undue influence must be presumed'.

Evidence of coercion does, in fact, emerge beyond the courtroom. Anurag Tripathi's 2018 investigation reported multiple claims that the castrations were carried out with force or deception. One of his informants, describing the surgeries allegedly conducted at the Dera's own 400-bed super-speciality hospital in Sirsa, stated: *'Jis din kisi ko napunsak banana hota hai, use subah se afeem ka nasha karwaya jaata hai jisse woh sunn pad jaaye aur ussey koi dard na ho aur woh virodh bhee na kar paaye'*—'The day someone is to be castrated, he is made to take opium from the morning onwards, so that he feels no pain and is unable to resist when being operated on' (Tripathi 2018, p. 63). Tripathi also reports an allegation that a boy 'was killed after he protested his castration at the Dera. . . [T]he Dera chief feared that he might leave the Dera and expose him' (ibid).

In light of both the legal principles invoked and the testimonial evidence presented, the Justice concluded that 'the complaint is serious' and ordered a CBI investigation. Summarising his decision, he wrote:

> [The investigation] is at the instance of a person who has suffered a privation of an organ. The abnegation of his own sexual identity has cast a serious psychological scar to the person. He narrates his own misery not to be confined to him but to several other persons, who are muted by fear that if they raise their voice, they will be done away with. There had been such a fear expressed in this court and the court has provided police protection. A large number of persons, who are

> said to have been affected, are spread over several States. . .. The imperatives for tightening the rigour of investigation is unexceptional. The State police has done no credit to itself by allowing grass to grow under its feet and nibbling at the periphery and conducting investigation which is worthless. I am not surprised at the petitioner's apprehension that they feel overwhelmed by the large following that the 5th respondent [the DSS guru] has within or without the State. In a democracy, numbers mean everything. The clout that a person enjoys with patronage lying outside the spiritual circles can make even a powerful police force go limp and effete. The Court processes have already suffered in its attempt to prosecute the 5th respondent in three other cases. 12 years on and still no hope for a conclusion of the trial. Not in one single instance could the accused be brought before court. (Punjab-Haryana High Court 2014)

It is not only the devotees who were, in the Justice's view, rendered powerless. The 'limp and effete' State police, too, were effectively emasculated—complicit in the guru's repeated failure to appear in court on any of the charges against him. The State police 'complain[s]', abjectly, 'of law-and-order situation if the accused were to be brought to court' (Ibid.) The decision concedes that 'there were [previously] incidents of persons claiming to be disciples who shot themselves in court complex or died in pitiful state under the gaze of public, after slogan raising that they cannot bear the agony of their master being taken to court', but maintains that this cannot be a reason to avoid following normal legal process. Given the pattern of evasion and the failures of the State police, the Justice institutes a mechanism to monitor and supervise the CBI investigation itself in order to 'ensure it is being proceeded with in accordance with law and no force or influence is being brought against the investigating officials' (Ibid.)

To reiterate, the decision was not a verdict. Although the CBI filed charges in 2018 against the guru and several surgeons alleged to have conducted the operations, the legal process has still not concluded.

4. Enabling Conditions

Guru-focused sex scandals and abuse, long a source of controversy, often unfold in institutional settings that seem almost designed to permit them (Lucia 2018). Rather than pathologising the moral failings of individual gurus, as Lucia rightly argues, we must attend to the enabling social contexts in which such abuse occurs. Yet, as noted earlier, the present case requires a dual lens: structural conditions shaped the field of possibility, but specific fantasies and logics animated the form and nature of the acts themselves. This section traces the structural and ideological conditions that rendered the DSS a 'readied forum' (Lucia 2018, p. 956) for abuse: rape, murder, and other crimes, as well as the castration of sadhus.

1. The first enabling condition is *proxemic desire*. Following Tulasi Srinivas (2010), Lucia identifies this as the devotee's learned yet intense longing for physical proximity to the guru as a means of spiritual transformation—a desire that operates alongside the absolute hierarchy of the guru-disciple relationship and helps explain how such contexts facilitate abuse. The concept will be familiar to any student of Indic guruship. In the case of the DSS, I have elsewhere noted how devotees seek 'close-up' darshan and aim to donate blood in the guru's presence, believing that physical nearness mediates blessings and strength (Copeman 2009). Lucia (2018, p. 971) adds that proxemic desire is not only a longing for spiritual effect but also a publicly legible sign of 'good devotion', since proximity confers social recognition. This is visible in devotees becoming sadhus and sadhvis: a residential proximity that also expresses devotional status. Yet the longing is spiritual as much as spatial—a desire the guru actively played upon when encouraging sadhus to

undergo surgery. Court documents and media accounts describe how 'the operation was performed on the trusted males with a promise that they would come near Gurmeet Ram Rahim' (Punjab-Haryana High Court 2012) —and thereby 'closer to god' (i.e., the guru) (Gupta 2017).

2. The second enabling condition concerns body and authority. Devotional submission has long been expressed through the body. Archetypal examples include Hanuman, the ideal *bhakt* (devotee), tearing open his chest to reveal Ram and Sita within, or the first ordained Sikhs offering their heads to Guru Gobind Singh. Reformist heir to such dramatic precedents, the DSS guru's development initiatives similarly depend upon, and disclose, a radically hierarchical structure in which devotee bodies are instrumentalised for labour. He acts as the knot in a circuit of centripetal and centrifugal motion: devotees offer their bodies and labour to him in a movement from many to one, which the guru then symbolically redirects to disaster victims, welfare recipients, or the nation at large (Copeman 2009, 2025). Gifts of blood, corneas and whole bodies pass through him to 'humanity'—the appropriation of devotional labour as humanitarian capital. Genuine assistance is provided. But unsurprisingly, the authoritarianism that enables these flows can also be routed in more violent directions. Literature on the routinisation of charisma in NRMs refers to 'escalating demands for sacrifice' and the production of 'ever greater tests of follower loyalty' (Bromley 2008b, p. 150), which appear vividly here. Consider the 'yes ladder'—a persuasion technique in which large commitments are secured through a sequence of smaller ones (A. Singh n.d.; see also Karia 2014). From blood to corneas to whole bodies, and then still further: the guru reaches ever more deeply into the bodies of his followers, drawing on such templates as that of Hanuman to thrust the sacrificial idiom into the sterile spaces of the 'super specialty hospital'. A new, and yet very old, terrain of devotional bioavailability is defined.[12]

The offering of testicles may seem extreme, but it is not wholly incongruent with the archetypal demands of devotion. Existing practices of asceticism and bodily offering, combined with the depth of hierarchical inequality within the organisation, created conditions in which sadhus were effectively unable to refuse surgery—though, in some cases, more overt coercion was also employed. After a meeting in which 'the sadhus were told that they had to go through a minor surgery which would bring them "directly in touch with God,"' the guru reportedly met them one-on-one. 'Those who agreed to go through the surgery at that time did not exactly know what it was all about. They were treated royally that day,' a former devotee recalls. 'Those who refused to comply were humiliated and abused by Gurmeet. Some were even sent to the torture room and beaten up for days' (Tripathi 2018, p. 81).

3. A third enabling condition was the guru's apparent impunity. Though imprisoned at the time of writing, it is not for the castration of his devotees—and it took decades for even the charges that led to his conviction to be seriously pursued.[13] The guru repeatedly failed to appear in court, while politicians courted him for his vast 'vote bank'.[14] If this suggests collusion between state and guru (Jaffrelot 2012), the DSS also appeared to operate as a kind of de facto sovereignty—an insulated realm of delegated authority (Klem and Suykens 2018).[15] As S. K. Singh (2017, p. 21) observes, many deras function as 'little fiefdoms'. In the DSS's case, its 700-acre compound included schools, hospitals, farmland, private guards, and thousands of *sevadars* (volunteers), who laboured in exchange for basic existential security. The guru's autonomy within this domain—tacitly recognised by political actors—helps explain how he was able to act with such impunity. But the point is not only structural. The castrated sadhus were not incidental victims of this unaccountability: they were to form the guru's inner militia, charged with protecting the borders of the compound and the guru himself.

These formations—and the extraordinary force they imply—open onto wider analytic terrain. As Lawrence Cohen (1995) has pointed out, actual practices of castration are peculiarly generative in terms of metaphor, fantasy, and even social analysis; they can form the ground for commentary conjuring an array of non-physical 'castrated subjects' in the form of ridicule and humorous critique. This case was no exception. At the same time, seemingly limitless figurative castrations can risk displacing the physical act itself (ibid): the violent, life-changing procedure that remains central to our analysis. Nevertheless, it remains necessary in the present case to explicate certain DSS-related metaphorical castrations since it is precisely certain forms of fantasy that are capable of precipitating the action itself. Having provided an account from the courtroom of the actual deeds and circumstances surrounding them, then, and of their enabling conditions, the task now is to unravel their logics and rationales—logics that, in part, take shape through figurative castrations and symbolic displacement. It is to those I now turn.

5. Figurative Castration

Accusations that the guru had ordered the forcible castration of hundreds of male ascetics in his organisation predated his 2017 rape conviction, but they resurfaced in its aftermath—now recirculated and treated as credible in light of the court's verdict on other charges. In this changed context, they came to function as a newly plausible index of his sovereignty's extremity. The allegations appeared to confirm an already established image of monstrosity, forming part of a frequently recited catalogue of excesses: rape, alleged murder (for which he was later convicted), the post-conviction discovery of an arsenal of weapons in his luxurious *gufa* (residence, lit. 'cave'), secret tunnels connecting the *gufa* to the lodgings of female ascetics, and so on. Such 'medieval' atmospherics evoke earlier scandals involving other charismatic leaders, such as the Siddha Yoga guru Swami Muktananda, whose Ganeshpuri ashram was said to be 'arranged to suit Muktananda's convenience. "He had a secret passageway from his house to the young girls' dormitory… Whoever he was carrying on with, he had switched to that dorm." The guru often visited the girls' dormitory while they slept.'[16]

If castrations have rarely been carried out on such a mass scale in contemporary religious settings—with the partial exception of historical slave systems, where large-scale castration was routine, particularly in certain Arab contexts[17]—public discourse often registers slippages between castration and other forms of surgical control that have, in fact, been conducted en masse, and forcibly, too, in India's recent history: vasectomies and sterilisations (Tarlo 2003; Cohen 2004). Court documents reflect these slippages too, with police interviews sometimes conflating vasectomy with castration in descriptions of procedures undergone by devotees (Punjab-Haryana High Court 2014).

Below the line of the 'Mass Castration' news article cited earlier, comment threads are filled with contemptuous responses exulting in the operations as a kind of eugenic cleansing. 'Sanjay Gandhi reborn??', one comment reads. Another declares: 'MSG [one of the guru's nicknames] should be given Sanjay Gandhi award in memory of the turkman gate of the khangressman'.[18] Others offer more direct celebrations: 'This is good job. May he be awarded for population control'; 'It is a good thing that these retards were emasculated'; 'Hahaha… You want to see God, lose your testicles! And you trusted him, heights of stupidity! Now live the rest of your life with lifeless banana!' (Sura 2018b; The Times of India 2017). Still others return to the question of sexual control and rivalry—anticipating themes address further below—linking the castrations with the guru's rape of his *sadhvis*: 'Baba was afraid that some of his male followers may compete with him for sex with female followers. He eliminated the competition. How come these idiot male followers never realized the facts. Does any religion advocate castration for realizing god?'; 'SO IT WAS A

HAREM!'; 'He castrated them to enjoy with all 400 women's [sic]' (Ibid.). Together, these comments exemplify the ambient affective logics that circulate around the DSS castration case, where public ridicule blends with eugenic fantasies steeped in misogyny.

Though founded in 1948, the DSS only began to experience massive growth in the 1990s and early 2000s, following the accession of its current guru and the adoption of a strategy aimed at attracting new Dalit adherents—often from Sikh backgrounds—who were open to alternative offers in the face of continued caste discrimination within mainstream Sikh institutions, still dominated, in Punjab at least, by Jats.[19] In this context, the eugenicist and casteist inflection of the comments quoted above becomes all the more glaring. References to population control explicitly recall the Emergency-era suspension of democracy in the 1970s, when Indira Gandhi's son, Sanjay Gandhi, was given free rein to carry out coercive sterilisations of the lumpen masses—slum residents cast as 'backward' stains on the modern city, and, like DSS adherents with their maniacal devotion, figured as retardants to national progress and international respectability.

The slippages between sterilisation and castration in the comment threads are significant and not altogether inapt, given that the latter certainly achieves the former. For all their derisiveness, the comments' projections of the surgical effects speak to several of the logics that must be considered when trying to understand why the operations were undertaken. Were the *sadhus* castrated so they could 'see god'? That, apparently, is what they were told—the surgery presented as a radical instance of the asceticism already associated with being a *sadhu*. Was it a form of 'population control'? The comment is sardonic, but the idea that lifelong loyalty to the guru might be secured through the assured kinlessness produced by the operation—linking to the broader theme of disaffiliation in the literature on new religious movements—does appear to have been one of the underlying rationales, as we shall see. In journalistic accounts, explanations rarely go beyond versions of the claim that followers were 'castrated with the false hope that the emasculation would lead to realisation of god through Gurmeet' (Sura 2018a). If this may help explain why some devotees agreed to the procedure, it does little to clarify the guru's own motivations. For the most part, the castrations were framed simply as further proof of his depravity, and of the dark surrealism of a movement that had seemed to emerge from nowhere, only to assault the public from the mid-1990s onwards with a baroque confluence of *guru-*, *desh-*, and *manav-bhakti*—a humanitarianism that included devotees marrying sex workers to 'rescue' them from the profession, public pledges to 'quit homosexuality', mass de-addiction drives, the most hand sanitisations in a single day, the world's largest vegetable mosaic, and more.

The comment threads erupt with castration metaphors, extending the accusatory logic to contemporary political figures. 'BJP and its leadership, the whole Khattar [Haryana Chief Minister] cabinet and Modi praised [the guru] and visited his ashram [i.e., sought his electoral endorsement], Modi is already a castrated man thus has run away leaving his wife'; 'Yesterday, the whole middle-class citizen of this country underwent mass castration at the hands of our [Finance] minister and our great PM was seen cheering'; '*Dalitho ko Hindu banana nikla tha*' ('he made Dalits into Hindus'; here implying Hindu emasculation); 'MSG should be sent to J&K for "sanitizing" stone throwers caught by army, PDP MLAs and Hurriyat *dalal*s'.[20]

Castration becomes wildly overdetermined. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the middle class, and Dalits all appear as its figurative victims, while the 'anti-nationals' of Jammu and Kashmir remain conspicuously uncastrated—hence the facetious suggestion that the guru be dispatched to the region.[21] The commentary slides between registers, with first-order references to the DSS surgeries spurring second-order metaphoric uses of castration as a shorthand for compromised masculinity: a gesture that folds humiliation into a broader discourse of national and political diminishment.

But as these proliferating meanings threaten to exhaust themselves in metaphor, it becomes necessary to return to the act itself and to the logics, however partial or elusive, that may have animated it. With the guru's projection of theatrical sovereignty and the broader conditions enabling his authority now established—and with attention given to the metaphorical overloading of castration in public discourse—we now turn to the logics that appear to have animated the act itself.

6. Castration Logics

The DSS guru's projection of sovereign masculinity was not limited to theatrical display. It structured everyday life within the dera and shaped a militant ethos of loyalty among his closest followers. As part of the DSS initiation pledge, devotees are instructed to 'be ready to sacrifice your life to protect the honour of your motherland and your Guru' (Dera Sacha Sauda 2007). This reflects a broader logic in which the guru's personhood becomes inseparable from the institution he leads—a configuration not uncommon in parts of contemporary Punjab, where charismatic leaders assemble and head devotional formations that move between religious idioms and militarised or political registers (Jodhka 2008). In the case of the DSS, its evolution into a self-governing, self-contained domain of delegated authority—where sevadars labour in return for subsistence, and para-policing structures reinforce internal discipline—anchors an ethos of defensive loyalty that draws on but does not replicate state forms. The pledge to defend the guru's honour at all costs—to 'sacrifice your life'—moves beyond metaphorical injunction; rather, it is materially sustained through the internal architecture of the dera. Its compound-based militarised moral economy, structured around devotional protection and sovereign paternalism, suggests that the call to sacrifice was inscribed in the everyday infrastructures of DSS life. This militarised devotion was increasingly staged in response to perceived threats. The guru's self-produced films depict the dera as besieged by external enemies: most prominently, the drug mafia, presented as hostile to his popular de-addiction programmes.[22] Yet the dera's actual vulnerabilities lay elsewhere. One source of sustained opposition came from Sikh orthodox groups, who viewed the guru's controversial decision in 2007 to dress as Guru Gobind Singh as blasphemous mimicry. The backlash included social ostracism and demonstrations, as well as attempts on the guru's life.[23] A second, ultimately more decisive threat emanated from the Indian state—especially its legal apparatus and police. After years of impunity, the accumulation of criminal charges finally culminated in the guru's conviction and incarceration in 2017.[24]

As Jodhka (2008) notes, many deras, including the DSS, function as 'mini-empires', owning extensive land and resources, with some wielding agricultural and bureaucratic authority rivalling that of the state itself. One dera in Gurdaspur district was reported to own 4000 acres of land; another had its own land acquisition officer. These domains of sovereign accumulation are often traced, in their own mythology, to imperial gift—land granted by Mughal rulers or Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Within this system of divine-cum-feudal governance, the guru himself is referred to by followers as *Pitaji* (respected father), *Maharaj* (great king), and, together with his family, as the 'Holy royal family'.[25] This language of kinship and sovereignty finds material expression in what S. K. Singh (2017) terms the DSS's 'patriarchal fiefdom'—a domain of moral and reproductive control in which sevadars work in exchange for food and shelter, bound by a devotion that is tied to existential dependence. Equally, in DSS films and grand devotional gatherings, the guru is often clad in Mughal-style regalia, and, as noted earlier, the DSS has on occasion explicitly claimed similitude with Mughal rule and tradition. The DSS guru's self-fashioning thus fuses charismatic authority with the sovereign opulence and absolutism of the Mughal court, akin to the 16th-century figure of Emperor Akbar, who was portrayed as a composite

of emperor, *Sufi pir*, and Hindu guru (Pinch 2012, p. 75): an 'all-in-one' configuration the DSS guru clearly seeks to recreate.[26] If the Akbar parallel evokes plural charisma in imperial idiom, the DSS's own iconography—in which the guru appears as action hero, athlete, astronaut, and more—extends this synthesis into the realm of mass-media sovereignty, where divine legitimacy is built as much through spectacle and masculine performativity as through lineage or doctrine (S. K. Singh 2017). These are not unfamiliar elements. What matters here is the particular way in which they are drawn together: neither improvised nor entirely inherited, but composed into a structure that is difficult to disaggregate—one that secures loyalty through practical routines, responds defensively to perceived threats, and envelops its authority in carefully stylised display.

For Mughal nobles, it is well known that eunuchs were a particularly favoured category of slave (Bano 2006, p. 352). They were entrusted with sensitive roles, including the management of treasuries, military oversight, guarding harems, and at times even protecting the emperor himself. 'With no spouse or family', notes historian Shadab Bano, the eunuch's 'loyalties could be held to lie entirely with the emperor'. On one occasion, 'even a free noble emasculated himself in order to emphasize devotion and loyalty to the king', suggesting that eunuchs helped establish the terms of intimacy and trust in a polity where devotion was idealised above all (ibid, p. 353). Meanwhile, kinlessness as an apparent guarantee of loyalty and incorruptibility remains a powerfully present idea in present-day India (Cohen 2004; Copeman and Ikegame 2012; Ikegame 2019). One can easily begin to see how a guru with a Mughal complex who rules over a besieged enclave might begin to see castration as a requirement for the men closest to him (in every sense).

Hindu ascetic logics and Mughal fantasy merge and interwine. The practice can be framed for initiates as a final step in *brahmacharya*, or even as a sacred consummation of proximity. Yet it also functions to bind, to immobilise, to guarantee. 'Gurmeet castrated followers close to him to ensure their loyalty', claimed one of Tripathi's (2018) sources; another that 'He does this so that people become his lifelong slaves'. The Mughal comparison and template are, once again, instructive. Historians report that castration under the Mughals was not only a punishment for serious crimes such as rape and murder—non-Muslim boys and men were castrated to be enslaved, particularly in Bengal (Joseph 2013). The DSS practice may be understood as a kind of fantasy merger: a replication of imperial modes within the idioms of contemporary guruship and renunciant discipline. Consider how, famously, Emperor Akbar manumitted his slaves so that they might serve him voluntarily as chelas. Gurmeet Singh, by contrast, sought to turn his chelas into slaves. However, if the devotee is castrated to ensure loyalty and secure the guru's trust and possibility of authentic devotion, the practice in fact appears to betray a fear on the guru's part precisely of the incompleteness of his disciple's devotion: that he might leave to form a family of his own. Their commitment to him (and asceticism) is ensured through medical means—a surgically enhanced devotion—because it cannot be guaranteed by strength of devotion alone. Castration produces a kind of *as if* loyalty or devotion: a body made to behave *as if* it were surrendered.[27]

If trust and loyalty in the Mughal court were secured through the use of eunuchs, so too were they shaped by the kinds of roles eunuchs were appointed to: positions marked by proximity to power and responsibility for its defence. This logic finds a disturbing afterlife in the DSS, where Mughal fantasy once again converges with older subcontinental templates of the warrior-saint and the renunciant army, led by guru-commanders and composed of slave-disciples (Pinch 2012). Consider how castrated sadhus were deployed by Gurmeet Singh: 'He will use them to form his private army', claimed a former sadhu interviewed by Tripathi. While castration extended beyond this cohort—his personal cook, for instance, is also said to have been subjected to the procedure—it appears to have been a

condition for entry into the Qurbani Dasta (Sacrifice Wing), an inner circle charged with enacting the guru's will through unflinching obedience and physical commitment:

> In 2002, a meeting of the castrated sadhus was convened by the Dera chief, in which he told them that for the outside world, they were 'eunuchs' now. They could neither marry nor procreate. They would soon start looking more like women than men, and if they left the Dera, society would not accept them. They should therefore pledge their complete allegiance to him, and give him complete control over their lives and deaths. Henceforth, they should do whatever assignment they were given without question, even if it involved dying or killing. From the group, Gurmeet selected more than [one] hundred *sadhu*s and said they would constitute the core of his private militia. Many of these *sadhu*s were inducted into the Qurbani Dasta as well, and were ready to commit suicide at the instructions of the Dera chief. Some were given the duty of guarding the *gufa* [his residence]. (Tripathi 2018)

To return to the question of masculinity and entwinement of guruship and emperorhood: slave-eunuchs or *khwajasarai*, were traditionally appointed as guardians of both social and sexual thresholds, tasked with protecting the harem or sacred interior (Bano 2008, p. 417). Because the ruler's household was considered inviolable, only those not viewed as fully adult males could be admitted to its inner spaces. This peculiar status—at once proximate and ostensibly non-threatening—helps explain why eunuchs were employed across multiple Indian regimes (Hinchy 2014, p. 417). The DSS guru's castration of male sadhus can be understood as an effort to reproduce a distorted facsimile of this configuration: a fantasy modelled on the Mughal household and sutured to the institutional templates of guruship and ascetic discipline. If it seems reductive to draw a parallel between the DSS compound and the harem, it is precisely through such flattened reenactments of imagined pasts that the guru appeared to construct his sacred domain. Evidence suggests that the guru had sexual relations with several sadhvis. There is little reason to think that his Mughal complex did not extend to a vision of the household as inviolable—a domain forbidden to adult males, and accessible only to the guru and to those who, by age, gender, or surgical intervention, could pose no threat to its sanctity. Recalling Mughal injunctions against adult male presence in the sacred interior, castrated sadhus not only neutralise the imagined threat to this feminised domain, they also serve as its ideal guardians, enacting a fantasy of loyal eunuch sentries and elite military aides. Somewhere between Krishna and the *Nazim*, the DSS guru casts himself—and demands corporeal proof of the claim—as the only legitimate male presence within the sanctum he fashions. As a former devotee has claimed, 'the castrations were done to safeguard sadhvis (female full-time followers) from possible sexual advances. . .: "The culture of initiating female devotees as full-timers was started by [the guru] and he was concerned about possible sexual advances by male full-timers (sadhus)"' (S. Singh 2014). What he was safeguarding, however, was not the sadhvis at all, but his exclusive masculinity and the unimpeded claim this granted him over them. It thus becomes clear that the rapes and castrations were not parallel outrages permitted by the same enabling conditions; they constituted a single architecture of masculine control—anatomically differentiated, yet intimately connected within a shared structure of domination.

This masculinist logic is hardly unique. Across cultures and historical periods, polygynous arrangements that benefit dominant men have often generated strategies to neutralise the perceived threat posed by lower-status males. 'Excess men'—statistically more likely to commit serious crimes and to threaten elite men's sexual monopoly—have been managed in a variety of ways, including exile, sending them to war, and, indeed, castration (Neupert-Wentz and Koos 2023; Wisman 2022). The DSS 'emperor guru', seemingly treat-

ing the ashram's sadhvi population as a kind of harem, developed his own form of restrictive polygyny enforced through surgery. If 'the true Kojahs or Eunuchs' of late nineteenth-century south India were 'chiefly seen about the houses of wealthy Mussulman nobles, by whom they are placed at the head of their zenanas or harems' (Shortt 1873, p. 402), the DSS guru appears to have sought to surgically guarantee the sexual trustworthiness of his closest male followers in a fantasy replication of the same logic.

Another form of guru-disciple relationship involving castration is that of the hijra guru, who oversees the *nirvan* operation of her hijra *chelas* (Reddy 2005; de Lind van Wijngaarden et al. 2012). Recall that the DSS guru reportedly told his castrated *sadhus* that 'for the outside world, they were "eunuchs" now [and] would soon start looking more like women than men'. Yet, as the presiding judge underlined, a fundamental distinction must be drawn between these devotees and hijra or transgender communities. While surgery may reflect an 'emotional compulsion' for 'TGs who have the indescribable agony of being trapped between two sexes', there is no indication that DSS *sadhus* experienced gender dysphoria or any prior uncertainty regarding their sexual identity.

At the same time, castration among hijras is often figured as an act of devotion and sacrifice—a meaning that appears, in a distorted register, to have informed the DSS practice as well. The guru's invocation of eunuch identity was not without cultural precedent. Hijras frequently identify with Islam (Reddy 2005; Saria 2015), and references to eunuchs increase markedly with the advent of Muslim rule in South Asia (Rao 2015). Yet Hindu mythologies involving sexual fluidity and reversal also offer powerful legitimating resources: Arjuna as Brhannala, Sikhandi in the *Mahabharata*, Vishnu as Mohini, Krishna's adoption of female form to slay Araka, and the Ardhanarishvara ('the Lord who is half woman') form of Shiva, to name only a few (ibid, p. 100). The guru's castration of male *sadhus* appears to have drawn eclectically—and instrumentally—on these traditions, without committing to any one of them.

Of particular relevance here are those Hindu devotional traditions in which the deity—typically Krishna—is imagined as the sole male presence in the sacred milieu. In the Gaudiya *bhakti* tradition, for example, Krishna is regarded as the only man in Vrindavan, and devotees, regardless of gender, adopt a posture of femininity in their relation to him: 'Since Krishna is the supreme being, and the highest relationship to be cultivated with him is the erotic one, and since we are operating within a heterosexual world view, all of Krishna's devotees must necessarily be female' (Manring 2004, p. 59). One Gaudiya offshoot, the *sakhi bhavas*, takes this orientation further, embracing feminine dress and comportment not only in ritual but in daily life. Some even undergo castration, renouncing their *purushatvam* (maleness) to more fully embody the role of Krishna's beloveds. Sectarian lore holds that Jangali and Nandini—whose gendered identities in Vaishnava literature remain deliberately enigmatic—were the first *sakhi bhava* practitioners (ibid, p. 60). As noted earlier, the DSS guru reportedly invoked Krishna's *prem leela* with 360 *gopis* to legitimise his own amorous conduct with *sadhvis*. But if the guru positioned himself as Krishna in that register, the converse was also true: like Krishna in the Gaudiya tradition, he was to be the only legitimate male presence. The devotional economy he curated thus echoes, in crudely appropriated form, this logic of exclusive masculinity: a reterritorialised *leela* in which castration serves not spiritual transformation but monopolistic control.

In the Sikh tradition with which the DSS is closely—if controversially—associated, God is similarly cast as the only True Husband: 'human beings are potentially His wives. The soul-wife seeks, or should seek, union with god-husband' (Grewal 1996, p. 143). If 'God alone is Man', with 'the Purusha and all other. . .His bride or female' (Kaur cited in Jakobsh 2014), this logic extends to the Sikh gurus themselves, who at times speak in the voice of the bride, adopting the feminine register in devotional utterance (Jakobsh 2014).

In this theological framework, only the divine—not the guru—is male. The DSS guru's gendered imaginary may draw from this idiom, but it also defaces it. Unlike the Sikh gurus, who embraced the feminine voice as a mode of devotion, he casts himself as its transcendence. He does not join the soul-wives in longing for union, nor does he speak from their position. It is he who is the sole male: not just guru, but God, Krishna, and Husband rolled into one. If the Sikh tradition metaphorises, he literalises: not through union, but through monopolisation.

Another facet of hijra experience, briefly noted earlier, concerns its intimate connection with asceticism. If the DSS castrations are viewed through the lens of *brahmacharya* taken to its extreme, they may be seen as further expressions of the movement's characteristic exorbitance: an embrace of hyperbolic renunciation and exaggerated devotional display. Where the Ramanandi ascetics of North India have occasionally practised *tangtor*—ritual castration performed in rare instances to render sexual intercourse impossible (van der Veer 1988)—the DSS appears to have virtually routinised such measures, transforming exceptional renunciation into something massified. Within hijra communities, too, the association between castration and asexual asceticism is sharply drawn. The *nirvan* operation—total emasculation involving removal of penis and testes—is understood to endow hijras with ritual potency, including the power to confer fertility on newlyweds and newborns. For hijras, castration is the sign of their 'essential asexuality'. Unlike *kothis* (men who dress as women), whom hijras criticise as governed by excessive sexual desire, the 'true' hijra is imagined as akin to a *sannyasi*—an ascetic who has transcended all erotic impulse (Reddy 2005, pp. 18, 150, 215). The DSS guru appears to have embraced a related logic, but in reverse: to be a 'true' sadhu was to be like a hijra—not because of mystical asexuality, but because one had been rendered physically incapable of desire.

Pratiksha Baxi (2021) recounts a case from Kerala in 2017, in which a guru's claim to self-castration was later revealed to be a cover for prolonged sexual abuse. A confidante of a family he had advised spiritually for years, the guru repeatedly raped one of its daughters, beginning when she was a minor. Later, as a 22-year-old law student but still subject to his abuse, she prepared for the next encounter and severed his penis. 'The swami, now transported to a hospital with the injured penis, which needed plastic surgery, claimed that he himself had severed his penis, for which he had no need as a renouncer' (ibid, p. 7). The example is worth recalling for the suggestive connections it discloses between abuse and asceticism. Though the renunciatory framing of castration-as-asceticism was clearly a rhetorical red herring—because it was quite evidently a cover for assault; a mystification of abusive power—one cannot help but wonder whether something similar was at play in the DSS case. The guru's pursuit of devotion insurance, lifelong servitude, and fulfilment of a Mughal masculine fantasy of polygyny and submission could hardly be posited to his male followers as justifications for surgery. Far easier and more strategically effective to frame the act instead as the radical extension of a spiritual path they had already begun.

Taken together, these castration logics do not collapse into a single rationale. What they offer, instead, is a volatile synthesis: sacrificial performance and sovereign excess coalesce with spiritual intensification in a mode of bodily governance that is at once systematic and theatrical—and sustained, crucially, by its refusal to declare its true grounds.

7. Reflection: Zero-Sum Alpha Guru-Ship

> 'The phallic signifier is, so to speak, an index of its own impossibility. . . the phallus is not simply lost but is an object which gives body to a certain fundamental loss in its very presence.'—Slavoj Žižek (1989)

Psychoanalytically informed accounts often suggest that 'masculine assertiveness and violence' is underwritten by 'symbolically castrating alienation' (Grist 2007, p. 20). Hilary

Neroni's (2005) reading of American cinema extends this line of thought: the violent man, she argues, is obsessed with nullifying his own castration. Violence, the ultimate masculine signifier, becomes both an expression of this castration and an effort to disavow it (ibid, pp. 52–53). From this perspective, the guru's desire to castrate others in order to secure his own masculinity discloses less mastery than anxiety—and perhaps a projection of some disowned part of the self. In this light, symbolic castration is displaced onto the bodies of others so that it might be imagined as overcome in the self: a zero-sum pursuit of alpha guru-ship, where masculinity is claimed as exception rather than just distinction. To occupy such an exceptional position—beyond the Law of castration against which other men are measured—the guru must achieve a form of masculine singularity attainable only through the symbolic and surgical diminishment of others. The guru's violent demand asserts his singularity precisely through a mechanism of rivalry. As Girard (1977) suggests, the desire for an object or status can entail a concurrent investment in its deprivation elsewhere. The guru's masculinised sovereignty similarly rests on orchestrated incompleteness: through the dismemberment of others, he asserts himself as the undivided exception. His contrastive strategy sought to install him as the man beyond vulnerability—the man not subject to castration—capable of redeeming the dera's degraded sovereignty.[28]

Proceeding from this, we must consider how such violence disguises itself as, or fuses with, the idioms of love and the gift. The DSS guru, after all, positioned himself as an advocate for hijra communities, celebrating the 2014 Supreme Court ruling recognising a 'Third Gender' as, in the words of a DSS press release, the culmination of his own 'incessant efforts' to bring them into the 'social mainstream with respect and equality'. His publicised petitioning on their behalf, renaming them as *Sukh Dua Samaj* ('a community that prays for the well-being of all'), and the claim that the DSS had been 'a pioneer in granting the eunuchs a respectable position in society' (Dera Sacha Sauda n.d.), appear incongruous in light of the covert operations discussed above. Yet it is precisely this coexistence of affection and violence, social uplift and corporeal repression, that invites further scrutiny.

While the DSS's attempt to take credit for the Supreme Court ruling is contested (Rana 2017), the guru's evident interest in the hijra community remains of analytical interest. The politics of hijra identity cannot be collapsed into the act of castration and no direct equivalence can be drawn between the guru's championing of hijra 'uplift' and his reported orchestration of castration practices. Yet the conjunction invites reflection. His presence in the operating theatre for some procedures, his embracing of newly castrated devotees, and the giving of gifts afterwards (Pundir 2021), evokes certain parallels with hijra gurus who oversee their chelas' castrations, care for them post-surgery, and host celebratory feasts in their honour (de Lind van Wijngaarden et al. 2012; Reddy 2005, p. 161). Notions of sacrifice and reverence appear in both contexts.

However, despite the earlier suggestion that the guru's own symbolic castration may underlie his infliction of the real thing, the DSS guru cannot be mistaken for a hijra guru. Far from signifying spiritual renunciation or ascetic potency, castration in the DSS is deployed to undo the guru's perceived lack—to secure polygynous privilege and guarantee total devotion. In ritual terms, emasculation intensifies nothing in the devotee's *tapasya* (austerity); rather, its power appears redirected: extracted and reabsorbed into the person of the guru. His actions may participate in what Comaroff and Comaroff (2018, pp. 297–98) describe as an 'occult economy', in which the vitality and procreative capacity of subordinates—in this case, his male devotees—is siphoned off to underwrite his 'unnatural accumulation' of masculine force.[29] This, again, is worlds away from the idioms and ethics of hijra initiation. There is, in fact, a tension between ascetic emasculation as a renunciatory path and the logic of ritual abuse found in historical castration cults, where emasculation serves less

to discipline the self than to capture the generative power of another (in some instances, through cannabilising the testicles).[30]

The affinities traced above between the guru and the hijra community—his public embrace of transgender rights, his ritualised affection for castrated followers—open the possibility that these acts partake simultaneously in devotional enforcement *and* in a grammar of love.[31] The guru, affectionately known as '*Pita Ji*' (respected father), appears to have curated within the ashram a kind of beloved hijra community—his own inner circle of selected intimates. In this way, he enacts a literalisation of what has been called the 'Indian Oedipal complex' (Goldman 1978, p. 363), whereby the son submits to paternal sovereignty, in effect castrating himself.[32] The emotional intensity of these arrangements invites us to approach castration here as more than coercion or sacrifice—as something that may also function as a paradoxical gift, a bestowed sign of favour. '*Tum par rehmat ho gayi hai* (You're being blessed)', the guru is reported to have said (Pundir 2021). To be chosen in this way is to be lifted beyond ordinary proximity—to receive, in extremis, the very recognition and closeness sought in entering the ashram. It is a form of worth that accelerates one's rise within the movement's charismatic hierarchy. Set against the threats reportedly made to those reluctant to undergo the procedure, the situation accords with what Stein (2017) has identified in cult settings: that love and terror often operate in tandem, forming a composite mechanism for dissolving individual agency and securing absolute loyalty.[33] In this way, the gift of castration becomes a grotesque form of bestowal: the guru endows his devotees with lack, ensuring their subordination through symbolic and literal incompletion—a Bataillean economy of sovereignty in which the sacred is indistinguishable from violation (Bataille 1993).

While scholarly work on NRMs should resist the temptation to conflate such movements with violence—as they are more often subjected to it than responsible for it (Bromley 2008b)—violence, when it does emerge within them, tends to be linked to the paranoia and absolutism of their leadership (ibid; Bromley 2008a). Aspects of the DSS guru's sovereignty were outlined above, along with his evident anxiety regarding disaffiliation and loyalty. The totalism that defines his mode of leadership has been discussed elsewhere.[34] Literature on cults and coercive authority frequently returns to the concepts of totalism and totalitarianism, underlining the ways in which such movements construct enclosed environments and actively exclude alternative attachments or frameworks of thought. As Stein (2017, p. 12) notes, this involves 'the active role required in creating this total environment, thus flagging the actions of the leader and the organization as the agent of their wishes'. The DSS guru's efforts to preclude the formation of future kin relations among his closest male devotees through castration—that is, to ensure and make irrevocable a life of service through the excision of their sexual organs (Wade 2019, p. 51)—strongly echoes Stein's (2017, p. 12) observation that 'totalist organizations attempt to block out any alternate relationships or beliefs, locking daylight out of the picture'.

In psychoanalytic terms, such totalism reflects how sadism can be understood as a distortion of mastery and control, rooted in a desire for absolute possession as well as a will to dominate—sometimes masked in love. While Freud ([1905] 2001) himself is more circumspect, later readings in this tradition (e.g., Klein 1946; Benjamin 1988) treat the sadist's violence as a means of seeking to bind and fuse: to assert total dominion through acts that collapse the boundary between violent mastery and love. Castration, in this light, becomes a means to achieve intimacy precisely through a mechanism of searing irreversibility. Beyond loyalty or even fear, proximity is reconfigured through a sacrificial unmaking of the other's future: a gift of closeness, construed as irrevocable belonging. The DSS guru's overreach can be understood in these terms: an anxious divinity shored up by orchestrating ritual emasculation, a performance of sacrificial excess intended to sustain

the illusion of divine exception. Yet, like all such regimes of sovereignty, it is haunted by the possibility that its authority may be nothing more than an elaborate projection: a theatrical surplus compensating for absence rather than radiating plenitude.

8. Conclusions

To castrate, in this ethnographic grotesquerie, is both an assertion of dominance and a mechanism of absorption. In the DSS case, the guru must be the exception to the Law of castration—the one untouched by the loss he orchestrates in others, a dynamic Girard identifies as being inseparable from the structure of rivalry and projected desire. If the zero-sum alpha guru seeks to preserve his sovereign singularity through the subtractive sacrifice of others' futures, this is also a devotional calculus: his masculine exceptionality is sustained by devotion's excess. Such exorbitance is neither simply instrumental nor wholly sadistic, but an operation of both subtraction and saturation: of staged irreversibility performed as divine plenitude.[35] In this light, the guru's ritualised overreach approximates what Sloterdijk (2013) calls an exaggeration procedure: an inflationary response to fragility, a baroque sovereignty driven by compensatory spectacle.

What appears, then, as devotion's ultimate proof may also be understood as a performance of 'as-if devotion', a formulation that draws inspiration from Cohen's (2004) account of 'as-if modernity', in which surgery—vasectomy, tubal ligation—operates as a mode of political production, compelling recipients to inhabit the role of disciplined, self-limiting subjects. While the present analysis shares this surgical mediation, it explores a different scene of scripted abstinence: one in which the burden of transformation falls less on the failures of the national subaltern than on the guru's desire to engineer fidelity through infrastructural control. This brings forth the connected notion of 'mechanical devotion'. To reiterate, this is not meant to evoke the dehumanisation of followers. It is the guru whose sovereignty pushes toward machinic logics of control. Instead, the term signals a mode of engineered fidelity where loyalty is secured through irreversible modification of the body, rather than conviction. What might once have been offered is now required. Affect is no longer cultivated but installed, rendered infrastructural. The guru builds a loyalty machine that extracts devotion through routinised submission.

Castration, here, functions as both the mechanism and the symptom of the inflation this essay has sought to conceptualise: a final act that seeks to lock followers into irreversible relation while simultaneously advertising the guru's cosmic exceptionality. This essay has argued that such ritualised violations reflect both a desire for loyalty and a compulsion toward sacrificial accumulation, drawing eclectically on tropes of Mughal kingship, hijra initiation, and devotional slavery to generate a conjured sovereignty at once archaic and opportunistic.

This orchestration of irreversible subordination may also cautiously be read through the prism of sovereignty as conceptualised by Schmitt ([1922] 2005) and Agamben (1998). The guru's capacity to mark certain bodies for exclusion from futurity, while elevating them as inner-circle intimates, bears resemblance to the logic of *homo sacer*: one who is simultaneously included and excluded, sacralised and violable. Yet unlike Agamben's bare life, the castrated devotee here is not stripped of symbolic value but endowed with it, through sacrificial incompletion. The sovereign, in this case, manufactures sacred exception not by withdrawing the law but by implanting submission as devotion's irreversible kernel.

In light of this, it becomes difficult to regard the DSS guru's use of both rape and castration as separate manifestations of impunity; they function, instead, as entwined enactments of masculine sovereignty. Each, in different ways, works to resolve the same structural problem: the guru's fantasy of exclusive access, in a setting where other men's proximity to women threatens to unsettle the imagined order. In this context, castration becomes both a

technology of loyalty and an anatomical solution to the problem of 'excess men'. Surgical subordination acts as the guru's bid to resolve a crisis of masculine surplus and threatening proximity. What results is a violently orchestrated topology of devotion, in which rape secures possession and castration eliminates potential rivals. Mechanised loyalty becomes a tool of containment: of other men's desire and of a sovereignty no longer stable enough to assume itself. And so the guru's actions stage a zero-sum economy of charisma in its most distilled form: domination through the bodily erasure of competitive masculinity.

While specific to the DSS, this mode of as-if devotion may also reflect a broader reconfiguration of affective life. From biometric emotion-recognition systems to AI-mediated caregiving, contemporary forms of attachment are increasingly shaped through automation and routinised expression.[36] The surgical enforcement of fidelity examined here thus resonates, however obliquely, with emerging global conditions in which intimacy is displaced by structure and affect is compelled through procedure rather than cultivated in relation.

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Notes

1 The distinction drawn here between sexual and non-sexual violence reflects a division in the scholarly literature rather than a fixed analytic separation. My aim here is to bring together analyses that have often circulated separately, not to suggest that the forms of violence they examine are mutually exclusive. Indeed, what counts as 'sexual' or 'non-sexual' may itself be contingent and overlapping.

2 For overview treatments of the Dera Sacha Sauda, see Copeman (2009, 2025) and S. K. Singh (2017). See also Baixas (2007), Jodhka (2008), Bochkovskaya (2018), Tripathi (2018), S. Singh (2019, 2024), and Ram (2024).

3 Beckerlegge is drawing on Rigopoulos (1993, p. 130).

4 Stories of Krishna have long been called upon by gurus (and others) as divine justification for adultery and/or abuse of female devotees (Copeman and Ikegame 2012).

5 Though that is not to say there is nothing on guru abuse/transgressions targeting boys and men: e.g., Srinivas (2010, chapter 5), Lucia (2018, 979n). See also the volume *Sexual Violence Against Men in Global Politics* (Zalewski et al. 2018) and in particular the chapter by Myrttinen (2018).

6 See discussion in Copeman (2009), based on fieldwork in Sirsa in 2004: 'One of the ways in which the [DSS] proclaims its reformist credentials is through its professed disdain for conventional asceticism. The guru's public declarations are often directed toward the demystification of the figure of the sadhu. . . The Dera Sacha Sauda [houses] roughly 350 "sadhus" and 100 "sadhvis" at its Sirsa ashrams. . .' That 400 male sadhus are alleged to have been castrated suggests that these figures later rose dramatically.

7 As Bromley (2008b, p. 146) notes, it is frequently 'unclear what constitutes a new movement. . . In reality there are few truly new religions. Most movements labelled as "new" derive from or borrow major ideological and organizational elements from long-established religious traditions, as have the Hare Krishna from Bengali Hinduism, the Unification Church from Christianity, Aum Shinrikyō from Buddhism, and the Branch Davidians from Adventism. In short, the criteria for distinguishing newness are much more complex than can be conveyed through any simple dichotomy.'

8 The phrasing here draws on Gold (2019, p. 460).

9 See Copeman and Duggal (2023a) for further exploration of these different roles.

10 On the demographic composition of DSS devotees, see (S. K. Singh 2017; S. Singh 2019).

11 Srivastava's (2009) concept of 'Disney divinity'—used to describe the polished devotional spectacle of the Akshardham Temple complex in Delhi—offers a useful comparative provocation. Both, in their own way, offer a species of 'flattened reenactment'. The

DSS's sovereign aesthetics, however, operate less through architectural coherence than through exaggerated bricolage: a theatrics of crudeness rather than finesse (see Copeman and Duggal 2023a).

12 See Cohen's (2004, p. 167) generative repurposing of biomedical bioavailability as a social concept. On the trope of the five-star or 'super specialty' hospital in South Asia, see Cohen (2011b). For guru-founded hospitals as socially prestigious sites of service and display, see Copeman (2009) and Srinivas (2010). In the DSS case, the super-specialty hospital functions less as a neutral site of care than as a space of orchestrated submission: a clinical theatre of sovereign control, where ritualised violation is made to masquerade as care.

13 He is frequently, and controversially, let out for long stretches on parole.

14 'The deras wield tremendous influence on their followers, and politicians value this power of the dera gurus. Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, for example, had a massive sway in the Malwa region and is believed to have significantly influenced elections in Punjab in the past' (S. K. Singh 2017, p. 22).

15 See Nanda (2017) on 'divine lawlessness'.

16 Rodarmor (n.d.). See also: Tandon (2021). Sincere thanks to Patrick McCartney for these references.

17 For discussion of large-scale castration in the context of Arab slavery systems, see Toledano (1998) and Hunwick and Powell (2002).

18 'Khangress' is a contemptuous means of referring to the Indian National Congress, which implies its preoccupation with 'minority appeasement' (or 'pseudo-secularism'). 'MSG' is an acronym of 'Messenger of God'.

19 Jats are 'non-servile cultivating people' (Bayly 1999, p. 37). Scholars sometimes argue that if, in other north Indian states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Tamil Nadu, Dalit assertion has manifested in party politics with the proliferation of powerful caste-based political formations, in Punjab such assertion is routed through devotional movements like the DSS and Ravidassia—though the DSS is by no means a singularly Dalit outfit. See Copeman (2023) on Jat domination of the Sikh religion.

20 I.e., he should be let loose on others who 'need castrating'—in this case Kashmiris protesting against the Indian government's intransigence on the question of self-determination. After Modi became Prime Minister in 2014, and even more so after his party the BJP won an outright majority in 2019, he began 'to associate the Kashmiri struggle for self-determination with terrorism. Not only [did] the BJP speed up its ultra-nationalist policies, [it] also delegitimize[d] the Kashmiri struggle for freedom by likening it with "Islamic terrorism"' (Sit 2019). 'Stone throwers' pertains to the act of stone pelting by Kashmiris (in support of separatist and insurgent activities) directed at Indian forces and the Jammu and Kashmir Police, who are stationed to manage crowds in the region of Jammu and Kashmir.

21 The trope of the castrated politician is a familiar one: politicians unable 'to create meaningful bonds of sovereign filiation through proper giving' are figured as eunuch-like (Cohen 2004, p. 185). Indeed, one commentator said of the castrated devotees: 'All those 400 have become politicians' (a further comment exhorted: 'Castrate all politicians who used to rub their nose on this bastard-son-of-a-bitch's feet').

22 See Copeman and Duggal (2023b) on these films.

23 For background on this, see Copeman (2012).

24 He continues to face many further charges. Police entering his *dera* after his imprisonment found an arsenal of weapons. The notion of the guru as a military commander possesses deep historical antecedents (Pinch 2006).

25 See Copeman (2009, Chapter 5) for further details.

26 See Copeman and Duggal (2023b) for further discussion of such imagery.

27 The key influence here is Cohen's (2004) magisterial work on surgery as a vehicle of what he terms 'as-if modernity', productive through vasectomy or tubal ligation in the context of mass campaigns of population control. See further discussion below of Cohen's conceptualisation.

28 A paraphrasing of Hilary Neroni (2005, p. 126).

29 I am very grateful to Patrick McCartney for encouraging this line of thinking.

30 See Ross (1995) on castration in the context of satanic ritual abuse and Servadio (1958) on 'magic and the castration-complex'. Daly (1938), in a psychoanalytic approach relevant to the present analysis, considers the goddess Kali's blood drinking for obtaining (stealing) the strength of others a female displacement of castration for the same purpose.

31 I am very grateful to Amanda Lucia for insisting on this nuancing.

32 See also Ramanujan (1999) and discussions in Kakar (1981) and Reddy (2005).

33 Consider also the concept of 'trauma bonding' between victim and perpetrator (Herman 1992, p. 92).

34 See 'The total guru: Film star guruship in the time of Hindutva' (Copeman and Duggal 2023b).

35 See Copeman and Duggal (2023a) for more detailed exploration of 'plenitude' in such contexts.

36 For suggestive parallels, see McStay (2024) on the automation of empathy, Daily et al. (2017) on affective computing and Vallverdú and Casacuberta (2014) on the machinic mimicry of emotions in medical tech.

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