Where Piety and Politics Converge: State Patronage of a Guru-Shrine in Bengal

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Abstract: This article examines and analyses the socio-political implications of the patronage and development of the Bengali guru-shrine of Belur Math, the headquarters of Ramakrishna Mission, by the central government of India. Founded by Swami Vivekananda – regarded as one of the most renowned Hindu cultural leaders of nineteenth century colonial Bengal – Belur Math is a symbol of cultural heritage for Bengali-Hindus. In 2017, Belur Math was the only temple from West Bengal to be selected for religious-tourism development under the Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Augmentation Drive (PRASAD) scheme,[2] a national project launched by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and helmed by Narendra Modi, the prime minister of India. Under the PRASAD scheme, the math underwent a series of infrastructural developments, which also included accompanying political signage. I use these developments with their accompanying political signage as an entry-point for discussing the politicization of particular devotional sites by the BJP (the ruling party of India since 2014), and consider its various socio-political implications at both the regional and national levels. Using an ethnographic approach, the study asks: 1) What are the political implications of state patronage of a religious site with prominent display of political signage? 2) How do the new developments affect the experiences of everyday visitors at the site? 3) How do the lay devotees interpret the foray of political signage within a religious space? The study addresses these questions through field work observations and interviews with various actors, such as lay devotees and visitors to the shrine and state tourism officers.[3] Through a close analysis of the PRASAD scheme's implementation at the math and the devotees' responses to it, I suggest that, although normalised as a government initiative to develop the religious site and promote religious-tourism, the project actually emerges as a well-coordinated political strategy: as the BJP attempts to make in-roads in Bengal's regional political landscape, this project is meant to appeal to the middle-class Hindu-Bengali lay devotees of the guru-faith organization.[4] Accordingly, this article provides insights into the BJP's recent trend of capitalizing on Hindu gurus and sacred shrines as a specific and valued Hindu cultural good, and considers the various ways such alliances benefit both the political party and the religious organization.

Keywords: Belur Math, Ramakrishna Misson, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), heritage, West Bengal

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1. Due to the fear of facing undue reprisal for publishing under her real name, this author has opted to publish under the pseudonym Tara Conners. Tara Conners holds a PhD from a Canadian post-secondary research institution.
2. In 2021 the term "heritage" was added to the name, turning PRASAD into PRASHAD: Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Heritage Augmentation Drive. See "PRASHAD Scheme," Government of India Ministry of Tourism, accessed November 19, 2022, https://tourism.gov.in/prashad-scheme.
3. Research for this study was conducted in Kolkata (West Bengal) in two phases, from December 2018 to February 2019, and the month of November 2019.
4. I do not delve into the philosophical teachings of the organization and how it projects Hindu nationalism (or not). Rather, I am interested in exploring how the material developments to the math brought about by the central government's patronage have been engaged with, and interpreted by, devotees. I also consider the political implications of the new materiality of the shrine.

Swami Vivekananda's ideals are more relevant in today's world. We would take the state on the path of development following the principles of Swamiji.

– West Bengal BJP president Dilip Ghosh[5]

The Ramakrishna Mission is a transnational guru-faith organization whose spiritual and administrative headquarters are located at Belur Math, on the western banks of the river Hooghly on the outskirts of the city of Kolkata, West Bengal. Swami Vivekananda, a prominent nineteenth century Hindu reformer, founded Belur Math in 1898 to enshrine the relics of his guru,[6] Ramakrishna Paramhansa (1836–1886), a well-known mystic-saint of colonial Bengal. The site was established by Vivekananda with the dual purpose of commemorating his guru's sacred memory as well as providing a place of residence for the ordained monks of the Ramakrishna Mission. In contemporary times, Belur Math functions as a prominent guru-shrine and pilgrimage center for devotees, both domestic and international.

The Belur Math complex covers a large area of almost forty acres, and consists of several structures: the Ramakrishna temple (opened in 1938), the Sarada Devi temple (opened in 1921), the Vivekananda temple (opened in 1924), and, finally, the Swami Brahmananda temple (opened in 1924). Each temple enshrines the relics of its namesake. A Hindu *samadhi* shrine marks the final resting-place of a realized guru's body and reflects the traditional understanding that the perfected body of a realized sage is a "purified expression of absolute consciousness and therefore preserved as a localized instantiation of sacred power."[7] The temples constructed upon the sacred bodily remains of the main saints of the tradition makes Belur Math a sacred center marked by the gurus' immortal presence. The space is thus understood to be sacred, purified by the presence and ascetic performances of the monks of the Order, as the shrine also operates as a monastic residence (math) of the monks of the Mission.[8] Belur Math refers to the specific physical locale of the temple complex which has a material dimension, a "place" in Yi-Fu Tuan's sense of a physical locale "endowed with value."[9]

As I will demonstrate below, each component of the math – such as the founder of the organization (Swami Vivekananda), the (deified) saints of the organization, as well as its membership composition

5. "TMC-BJP Lock Horns over Swami Vivekananda Legacy Ahead of Assembly Polls," *Times of India,* January 12, 2021, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/tmc-bjp-lock-horns-over-swami-vivekananda-legacy-ahead-of-assembly-polls/articleshow/80238229.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst.
6. In Hinduism, a 'guru' is generally understood to be a religious teacher (or leader) who has experienced the *brahman* (supreme consciousness of the universe). Karen Pechilis notes that *guru* is a relational, third person term; it is a title by which one person acknowledges the wisdom of another. Pechilis notes that gurus are representatives of specific religious traditions who have a publicly recognized status and the authority to teach and possibly lead a disciple to salvation. Initiation into a lineage becomes an important defining feature of the guru cult. See Pechilis, *The Graceful Guru: Hindu Female Gurus in Indian and the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
7. See Mark Joseph McLaughlin, "Lord in the Temple, Lord in the Tomb: The Hindu Temple and Its Relationship to the Samādhi Shrine Tradition of Jñāneśvar Mahārāj" (PhD diss, 2014, University of California, Santa Barbara), 2, https://escholarship.org/content/qt4650q3zk/qt4650q3zk_noSplash_d8bf151b5df104dd47d52ef50f49a7d8.pdf.
8. Legally, the Ramakrishna Math and the Ramakrishna Mission are two separate entities. While the former primarily focuses on the dissemination of the spiritual teachings and philosophy of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Vedanta, the latter overlooks the department of *seva* (organized service) and the educational enterprises of the organization. Although the two entities are legally and financially separate, they are closely interrelated in several ways are regarded as twin organizations, with Belur Math acting as the headquarters for both. In this article, however, I have used the designation Ramakrishna Mission to refer to the religious organization in its entirety encompassing both the Math and the Mission.
9. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 6.

(upper-caste, Hindu-Bengali middle-class population) – played an important role in the selection of the site for patronage by the BJP-led central government. Scholars such as Romila Thapar,[10] and recently Corinne Lefèvre,[11] have noted that the selection of religious sites for development by Hindutva[12] political parties is often tied to several factors, the most important among them being 1) the identity of their patrons (i.e., the individuals or historical figures who commissioned or directly financed the sites and have political and ideological affiliations to the Sangh Parivar[13]); and 2), the particular narrative of Indian history and culture represented by the sites. It is important to clarify that, in the above context, the term *patron* specifically refers to individuals whose initiatives and efforts were instrumental in the initial establishment of the religious sites, and in the case of the math – Swami Vivekananda. Swami Vivekananda, a celebrated nineteenth century Hindu monk who rose to prominence with his speech at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, formed the Ramakrishna Math and Mission in 1989 with a heavy focus on the ideals of masculine Hinduism, charitable works, and social service, guided by the ideological principle of "practical Vedanta." Right-wing Hindu political leaders have long co-opted the figure of Vivekananda as a symbol of Hindu nationalism, selectively using the monk's teachings and quotes to advance a Hindu nationalistic rhetoric. Scholars[14] have noted Vivekananda's (mis)appropriation by right-wing Hindu political groups, such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)[15] and the BJP. The focus of these studies predominantly lies in examining this appropriation through a philosophical and/or a socio-historical lens, analyzing the Hindu right-wing leaders' deployment of Vivekananda's legacy, particularly his concepts of *seva* (organized service), *karma-yoga*, and his views on working for the uplift of the motherland (Bharat

10. Romila Thapar, "Cultural Transaction and Early India: Tradition and Patronage," *Social Scientist* 15, no. 2 (1987): 3–31.

11. Corinne Lefèvre "Heritage politics and policies in Hindu Rashtra," *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* 24/25 (2020): https://journals.openedition.org/samaj/6728.

12. Hindutva refers to the hegemonic political ideology of asserting the primacy of Hindu religion, culture, and values as the foundation of the Indian nation-state, while marginalizing religious and cultural minorities as the 'other.'

13. The family of associations known as the Sangh Parivar refers to an interconnected network of right-wing Hindu organizations sharing the common ideological foundation (Hindutva). Some of the notable organizations under the Sangh Parivar are those of the political party of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the religious organisation Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), and the cultural body known as Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), along with many other smaller closely connected groups. All these organizations uphold and promote the political ideology of 'Hindutva' asserting the primacy of Hindu religion, culture and values as the foundation of the Indian nation-state, while marginalizing religious and cultural minorities as the 'other.'

14. See, for example: Michael Gillian, "Bengal's Past and Present: Hindu Nationalist Contestations of History and Regional Identity," *Contemporary South Asia* 12, no. 3 (2003): 381–398; Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Swami Vivekananda's Construction of Hinduism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1–16; Samta P. Pandya, "Seva in the Ramakrishna Mission Movement in India: Its Historical Origins and Contemporary Face," *History and Sociology of South Asia* 8, no. 1 (2014): 89–113; Ian Hall, "Narendra Modi and India's Normative Power," *International Affairs* 93, no. 1 (2017): 113–131; Arpita Chakraborty, "Tracing the Rise of Ascetic Masculinity in India," in *Women, Gender and Religious Nationalism*, ed. Amrita Basu and Tanika Sarkar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Gwilym Beckerlegge, "Saffron and Seva: The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's Appropriation of Swami Vivekananda," in *Hinduism in Public and Private: Reform, Hindutva, Gender, and Sampraday*, ed. Antony Copley (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 31–65. See also other bibliographic entries for Beckerlegge.

15. Formed in 1925, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is part of an the interconnected network of associations forming the Sangh Parivar. The RSS is highly influenced by the teaching of Vivekananda and puts emphasis on practices of celibacy and organized service for its active full-time members. The BJP also draws its ideological basis from the RSS, and, as of 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and sixty-two percent of his government ministers hold dual membership to the RSS and the BJP, revealing the various interlinkages between the two organizations. See Aminah Mohammad-Arif and Jules Naudet, "Academic, Scholarship, and the Challenge of Hinduvatism: Making Sense of India's Authoritarian Turn," *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* 24/25 (2020): 4.

Mata). But what is missing from these studies is an investigation of the politicization of the material dimensions of Vivekananda's legacy, for instance, the guru-shrine and math he established, and, moreover, how lay devotees have responded to the co-option of the monk by political parties.

Since 2014, with the ascension of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Narendra Modi, there has been a steady growth of state-led initiatives to promote Hindu pilgrimage and sacred sites as symbols of national unity. Some of the recent central government initiatives for the revival and redevelopment of (predominantly Hindu) religious sites have received scholarly attention,[16] with scholars often pointing to how the government-sponsored development of religious tourism at selective religious sites has more to do with identity-politics (based on Hindutva) than the simple maintenance or physical preservation of the site for the 'secular' purpose of tourism growth. However, these studies are disproportionately focused on North Indian case-studies and do not take into account lay-devotees' perspectives on the religio-political entanglements or political implications of this type of religious patronage. To address this imbalance, I shift the attention to Eastern India – Bengal specifically – through a case-study of the Belur Math, where I highlight and analyse Modi's interest in the guru-shrine as well as his relationship with the monks of the Order, both of which have been highly publicized in the media. The BJP's (and Modi's) interest in developing Hindu sacred sites for religious tourism also goes hand-in-hand with forming a close nexus with Hindu gurus and spiritual leaders. Jacob Copeman, Koonal Duggal, and Arkotong Longkumer opine that, for Hindu nationalists, the allure of Hindu gurus lies in the public perception of them as a "specific form of valued Hindu cultural good," thus making them instrumental in the nationalist political parties' assertion of Hindutva ideology and mobilization.[17] Véronique Bouillier also states that "new religious movements and gurus who situate themselves outside the main traditional sectarian organisations" and possess largely urban middle-class devotees with access to global media circuits, hold an "affirmative assertion of Hindu identity [that] may lead to an ideological proximity with Hindutva."[18] My research thus adds to the existing scholarship on guru-organizations and their entanglements with Hindu nationalism. Using the math as a case-study, I highlight: 1) how guru organizations and Hindu sacred sites are utilized by the BJP to make incursions into the regional Bengali political sphere by appealing to the middle-class population, and 2) the particularities of the Belur Math and Ramakrishna Mission and how Modi's close association with this Neo-Vedantic guru-faith-organization has helped him reshape his public image.

As religious scholar Maya Warrier notes, a characteristic feature of large transnational guru organizations are their urban middle-class devotee membership,[19] which is something that Sumit Sarkar, Partha Chatterjee, Amiya P. Sen, and Brian Hatcher have also noted with respect to the Ramakrishna

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16. See, for example: Vera Lazzaretti, "New Monuments For The New India: Heritage-Making in a 'Timeless City,'" *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 27, no. 11 (2021): 1085–1100; Rana P. B. Singh, Pravin S. Rana, and Sarvesh Kumar, "Hinduism, Heritagization, and Holy Cities in India," in *Great Transition in Indian Humanities,* ed. Chanwan Kim and Hansand Kim (Sŏul: Tahae, 2021), 227–270; Philippa Williams, "Making the 'Smart Heritage City': Banal Hinduism, Beautification and Belonging in 'New India,'" in *Spaces of Religion in Urban South Asia* ed. István Keul (New York: Routledge, 2021), 160–175.

17. Jacob Copeman, Koonal Duggal, and Arkotong Longkumer, "Hindu Nationalism, Gurus and Media," *Religions,* 14, no. 9 (2021): https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14091089. For more on the relationship between Hindu gurus, sacred centers and right-wing political parties, see: Christophe Jaffrelot, "The Political Guru: The Guru as Éminence Grise," in *The Guru in South Asia*, ed. Jacob Copeman and Aya Ikegame (New York: Routledge, 2012), 80–96.

18. Véronique Bouillier, "Modern Guru and Old Sampradaya: How a Nath Yogi Anniversary Festival Became a Performance on Hinduism," in *Public Hinduisms*, ed. John Zavos et al. (New Delhi: Sage), 373–91.

19. See Maya Warrier, "Processes of Secularization in Contemporary India: Guru Faith in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission," *Modern Asian Studies* 37, no. 1 (2003): 213–253.

Mission specifically.[20] Scholars have also commented on how the Mission is popular among contemporary middle-class *bhadralok* [respectable folk] and even non-resident/transnational Indians.[21] Speaking about Ramakrishna, Vivekananda and Bengal's temples, religious scholar Deonnie Moodie writes, "in the twenty-first century, Bengalis see these saints and gurus and Hindu temples as self-evidently representing their Bengali heritage. These are not disparate forms of Hinduism or separate aspects of middle-class culture for them."[22] In other words, Belur Math is regarded as a prominent symbol of Bengali-Hindu cultural-religious heritage by the Bengali middle-class population who also form its core membership base. The middle-class population is an important element here as it is the same demographic that the Modi-led BJP government aims to appeal to as a part of its electoral constituency. It was Micheal Gillan who first argued that the BJP's appropriation of Bengali cultural heroes/icons was a deliberate step in regional political campaigning, one meant to appeal to the *bhadralok* (gentle folk), the Bengali-Hindu middle-class – usually upper-caste, educated and urban – a group also linked to "asserting a modernist, 'vanguard' cultural role within, rather than outside, the confines of the nation."[23] Many of Gillan's observations are still relevant even two decades later, and are identifiable in the BJP's current political strategy to spread their political dominance over Bengal. This article can be seen as an extension of Gillan's work, as I suggest that the patronage of Belur Math is tied to BJP's and Modi's continued efforts in making political strides, not just at a regional level, but also at a national level, where the soft endorsement of the Hindu monks of a prominent religious organization becomes a crucial vehicle for reshaping the politician's public image and sanctifying his controversial domestic policies following a Hindutva ideology.

Infrastructural Developments in the Math under the PRASAD Scheme

In 2015, a year after Narendra Modi came to power, the central government, under the Ministry of Tourism, launched the *Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Augmentation Drive* (PRASAD) scheme, a national project intended to promote religious tourism across the country. Developed on the premise that pilgrimage and heritage tourism represent the main driving force behind the burgeoning trend of domestic travel within India, the project primarily focused on infrastructural developments of (selected) pilgrimage destinations, developments which would be able to attract and accommodate a high traffic of visitors. While the sites selected for the PRASAD scheme would receive funding directly from the central government, the project also proposed bringing in additional voluntary financial assistance in the form of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) for improved sustainability under this

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20. See Sumit Sarkar, "'Kaliyuga,' 'Chakri,' and 'Bhakti': Ramakrishna and His Times," *Economic and Political Weekly* (1992): 1543–1566; Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, vol. 4 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Amiya P. Sen, "Sri Ramakrishna, the Kathamrita and the Calcutta Middle Classes: An Old Problematic Revisited," *Postcolonial Studies* 9, no. 2 (2006): 165–177; Brian Hatcher, *Bourgeois Hinduism, or Faith of the Modern Vedantists: Rare Discourses from Early Colonial Bengal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
21. As Gavin Flood states, "Global Hinduism" is pre-dominantly rooted in the "Neo-Vedanta of Swami Vivekananda [...]. This kind of global Hinduism appeals to more educated, English-speaking, urban Hindus, many of whom live outside India." As quoted in Rajeev Dubey, "New Hindu Religious Movements in Contemporary India: A Review of Literature," *Sociological Bulletin* 64, no. 2 (2015): 155.
22. Deonnie Moodie, *The Making of a Modern Temple and A Hindu City: Kalighat and Kolkata* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 131–132.
23. Michael Gillan, "Bengal's Past and Present: Hindu Nationalist Contestations of History and Regional Identity." *Contemporary South Asia* 12, no. 3 (2003), 384.

scheme.[24] The PRASAD scheme marked a new phrase of direct state involvement with religious organizations by publicly endorsing Hindu pilgrimage and promoting religious tourism.[25]

The scheme was launched (in 2015) with an initial provision of INR 100 crore ($12.1 million USD) focusing on twelve religious sites[26] selected across the country. The funding was rolled out in phases, and from the eastern region, only the Kamakhya (Assam) and Puri (Orissa) temples made the first list. From 2016–2017 twelve more sites were added to the development scheme, with only Belur Math making it onto the list from Bengal.[27] Once selected under the PRASAD scheme the math was allocated INR 30 crore ($ 3.6 million USD) for beautification and infrastructural development and to assist its transformation into a religious-tourism destination.[28] While the math underwent a series of infrastructural developments under the scheme, what was notable was the political signage and hoardings acknowledging the role of the state in facilitating these developments, thus politically branding the site.

LED screens

On September 19, 2017, amidst a huge public gathering, the President of Ramakrishna Math and Mission, Swami Smarananda, in the presence of the Regional Director (East) India Tourism, Government of India, J. P. Shaw, inaugurated three large LED screens strategically installed across the math. Even before entering the math, visitors can spot the first LED screen looming above the entrance gates at an angle. The second one is positioned from across the main temple, while the third is located further down at the back on the western side towards the dining hall. The political branding is very cleverly inserted within the design of all the screens. The sign "PRASAD Scheme of Ministry of Tourism, Government of India" is printed at the top of the infrastructure, with "Implemented by Tourism Dept. Govt of West Bengal" on one side and "Constructed by Ramakrishna Mission, Belur Math" on the other (See Fig 1). With the acknowledgements engraved on it, the installed LED screens erected at the math act as a constant reminder of the benefactors of the infrastructure.

24. "PRASAD: National Mission on Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Augmentation Drive," Ministry of Tourism Government of India, accessed November 21, 2019, https://tourism.gov.in/sites/default/files/2021-12/Scheme%20Guidelines_8_0.pdf.

25. Though the scheme does include a few religious sites from other traditions such as Buddhism and Sikhism, the majority of the focus in on Hindu temples. See Nirmal Tiwari, "BJP's Bid to Cash in on Religious Tourism," *DNA English*, updated October 5, 2017, https://www.dnaindia.com/jaipur/report-bjp-s-bid-to-cash-in-on-religious-tourism-2550633

26. The first twelve religious sites selected under the PRASAD scheme were: Ajmer (Rajasthan), Amritsar (Punjab), Amaravati (Andhra Pradesh), Dwarka (Gujarat), Gaya (Bihar), Kedarnath (Uttarakhand), Kamakhya (Assam), Kanchipuram (Tamil Nadu), Mathura (Uttar Pradesh), Puri (Odisha), Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh) and Velankanni (Tamil Nadu). The number has now increased dramatically, incorporating forty-one religious sites in total. See "Rs. 727.16 Cores Sanctioned For Development of 41 Religious Sites Under PRASHAD Scheme Till Date: Shri K. J. Alphons," Press Information Bureau: Government of India Ministry of Tourism, December 18, 2018, https://www.pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=186549.

27. See "Rs. 727.17 Cores Sanctioned." In an interview, an officer from the West Bengal Tourism Department revealed that Belur Math was first proposed (for submission under the PRASAD scheme) by state government politicians after careful deliberations noting how well the site fulfilled the criterion for religious tourism circuit development, following the guidelines of the PRASAD scheme. Notably, the name of the site was first submitted as a proposal by the State Government, which I interpret as a careful move by the central government to refute any claims of direct political influence in developing the site.

28. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/debashis/-central-grants-rs-30-crore/articleshow/56766237.cms Accessed March 20, 2022.

Fig 1. LED screen inside Belur Math complex. (Author's own).

The screens come alive with accompanying music during public ritual performances by the monks, such as the *sandhya-arati* [evening vesper prayers], conducted inside the prayer hall of the Ramakrishna temple. Most days, particularly on weekend evenings, I observed small groups of people gather in front of the LED screen (the one closest to the prayer hall near the river) and watch the rituals. Most of them did not stay for the whole performance but slowly dispersed away over the course of the forty-five minutes. Those who waited for the entire duration usually had a companion inside the hall who joined them afterwards.

A few of my informants had expressed the "inconvenience" of the crowded prayer hall, as it generally gets difficult to get a direct sacred view (*darsan*) of the marble image of Ramakrishna during the *arati*, as the view gets obstructed by crowds of people in front of them. The specific seating arrangement at the main prayer hall (where the rituals are conducted) is also a contributing factor, since the audiences are seated on the floor of the hall.[29] A female interlocuter, Sharmila Basu, shared that even though she loves attending the *sandhya-arati* at the math, a hip injury and pain prevents her from sitting on the floor.

> I was really upset when I had to stop attending the *arati* in the evenings as I could not sit on the floor anymore. But then Ramkrishna heard my prayers and made arrangements. Then these big screens were put up outside in the lawn, screening the entire *arati*, and I can watch it anywhere from the lawn. I usually sit atop the balcony of the shoe-keeping counter area and watch the entire puja without having to go and sit inside the mandir.[30]

As the above comment reveals, the LED screens are a viable alternative that allows a devotee to engage with the rituals from the "outside" without having to directly access the space where it is performed, therefore making it advantageous for people who might experience difficulty in accessing the hall. However, not all my devotee interlocuters shared the same enthusiasm over the LED screens, pointing out that while the screens did offer an unobstructed view of the rituals, it did not offer the same experience of

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29. The seating arrangements call for men to sit in rows in the front section right after the *brahmacharyas*, followed by women in the middle section and then again, a few rows of men at the very back. Men, generally tending to be taller than women, can obstruct the view, especially if they are sitting at the front.
30. Interview with author, December 29, 2018.

being inside the space, crowds notwithstanding. The multi-sensorial dimension of the *puja* was an important aspect for most of my informants. As one devotee I met at the math stated,

> If I want to participate in the *arati*, I would rather sit inside the hall, even if its crowded. If I want an "unobstructed view" I might as well watch it online. It is available on YouTube. They telecast important festival *pujas* on YouTube as well as on their website.[31]

While acknowledging the convenience of technology, the devotee prioritized the physical and emotional experience of being present inside the space and directly participating in the ritual, echoing the importance of the multi-sensorial dimension of directly engaging in religious rituals, which most devotees seek for during temple visits.

I spoke to a monk of the math, and as I broached the topic of the LED screens and his opinion regarding it, he responded that the LED screens were installed to make the *puja* accessible for everyone, as the hall can only fit so many people. He described how in recent years over-crowding has become a real issue at the math, particularly during festivals and religious holidays. Even though the hall looks spacious and is well ventilated, space is limited in terms of how many visitors it can accommodate at one time. With the live screening of the *puja* ceremonies over three LED screens located strategically for maximum visibility, it becomes easier for people to engage with the worshipping rituals. He also pointed out that it is not just limited to telecasting *sandhya-arati*, but also to broadcast other worshipping rites (*puja*), and that it was a modern provision for devotees' convenience. From the monk's response, it can be gathered that the LED screens were installed with the aim of connecting larger number of lay devotees to engage with the devotional rituals of worship at the math.

Shopping Kiosks

Apart from the LED screens, another major way the project has transformed the site is by clearing up the encroachments of the commercial market vendors and footpath food stalls that thronged at the backside of the math, in the area towards the ferry ghats. Previously, the long lane separating the busy public road was thronged by commercial vendors selling various artifacts – from street food to religious souvenirs – mostly without any permits. It was an informally organized economy and not officially regulated. The shops themselves were non-permanent structures that can be loosely described as floating shacks. When the math was selected under the PRASAD scheme, all the "encroachments" were cleared up and replaced by thirty "shopping kiosks" where the previous vendors were rehabilitated with permanent brick and mortar stores and valid permits for their activities. Each kiosk displays a small placard displaying the PRASAD scheme sign, again as a conscious reminder of the benefactors i.e., the Government of India. Branding acknowledging the government's patronage in bringing about the infrastructural changes is highly visible at the site, strategically placed above the local vendors shops (called kiosks) (See Fig. 2) and even engraved in marble placards on the walled fence of the math near the shopping kiosks (Fig. 3). It can be said that the cultural economy of pilgrimage-tourism is constituted through local souvenir and food stalls for servicing pilgrims/tourists and benefitting the local economy, and lastly, swanky three-storied building as toilet block for sanitation purposes.

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31. Interview with author, November 21, 2019.

Fig. 2. Political Signage above Shopping Kiosks (Author's own).

Fig. 3. Marble placard on the Math's outside wall (Author's own).

Toilets and Sanitation: Profane Places within Sacred Spaces

The biggest change that has been brought about under the PRASAD scheme has been in sanitation, with the introduction of hand-washing sinks (Fig. 4) drinking water stations and most importantly, several small toilets across the math grounds, all bearing the PRASAD scheme branding over it.[32] The most impressive and attention-grabbing is the newly constructed (in 2018) three-storied toilet block building, which has the capacity to accommodate around two hundred individuals at a time (See Fig. 5). The toilet block was sponsored by the State Bank of India (SBI) under its CSR or Corporate Social Responsibility

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32. In 2014, right after his election, Modi launched the "Toilet over Temples" project as an initiative to address India's sanitation crisis by prioritizing the construction of toilets over the building of temples, as more than half of the population still lacks access to basic toilet facilities. Poor sanitation is a major public health issue, especially in rural areas where women and girls are often forced to wait until dark to relieve themselves, making them vulnerable to sexual harassment and assault.

programme (CSR),[33] which provided Rs.1.67 crore ($202,962 USD), as a part of central government's "*Swachha Bharat Abhiyan*" [Clean India Mission] (See Fig. 6).[34]

One of my female informants pointed out that it was a very welcome move as previously visitors, especially women, had a hard time accessing the toilets. She elaborated,

> Belur Math has changed completely from what it was even ten years back. Clean toilets, clean drinking water taps, and designated basins [sinks] to wash hands after having *prasad* [sacred food], it has become so convenient and easy. Previously, it was extremely inconvenient for elderly people, especially without easy access to toilets and we had to walk long distances outside from the math to find toilets. […] Also, this toilet is western style which is very convenient. I went to Dakshineswar last week, and faced the same regular issue over toilets [...] a long walk away from the temple into the parking lot. *Sarkar bhaloi byabostha koreche math e* [the government has done well at the math].[35]

It was interesting to note that my informant credited the central government for the toilet building instead of State Bank of India (SBI) whose branding is broadly displayed in front of the building. When I pointed this out to my interlocuter she again emphasized the central government's role, and commented that the credit lies with the government as they were the first ones to come up with the project – the bank basically just followed their directions. Inside the math premises near the new dining hall, there is also another smaller toilet block that is constructed as a part of the PRASAD scheme (See Fig. 7).

Fig. 4. Drinking water kiosks and taps near the new dining hall (Author's Own).

33. "Inauguration of New Toilet Block at Belur Math," Belur Math Media Gallery, accessed July 29, 2019, https://media.belurmath.org/inauguration-new-toilet-block-belur-math-1823/.

Since 2014, the Ministry of Corporate Affairs (MCA) mandated that companies having a five-crore net profit would have to spend 2 percent of their three-year average annual net profit on CSR activities in each financial year. See, "Mandatory 2% CSR Spent Set to Kick in from April 1," *The Indian Express*, February 28, 2014, https://indianexpress.com/article/business/ economy/mandatory-2-csr-spend-set-to-kick-in-from-april-1/.

34. The toilet block project at the math was inaugurated under the title "Swachchha Belur Math" project as a part of "Swachha Bharat Abhiyan" [Clean India Mission], a national campaign launched by the Government of India (BJP) in 2014 to eliminate open defecation and improve solid waste management. For more, see: Allison Berland, "Toilets First, Temples Later: Modi's Promising Act," *Foreign Policy*, February 27, 2015, https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/ 02/27/toilets-first-temples-later-modis-promising-act/.

35. Interview with author, December 27, 2018. Similarly, another interlocuter responded, "[The] Modi government has at least done a lot of work for Belur. The place was always nice to visit but now feels even more cleaner and you can feel the improvements walking inside [the premises]. The math needs money for maintenance, and it is great that Modi government is supporting the math" (Interview with author, January 20, 2019).

Fig. 5. New Toilet Block constructed by the State Bank of India under CSR program (Author's Own).
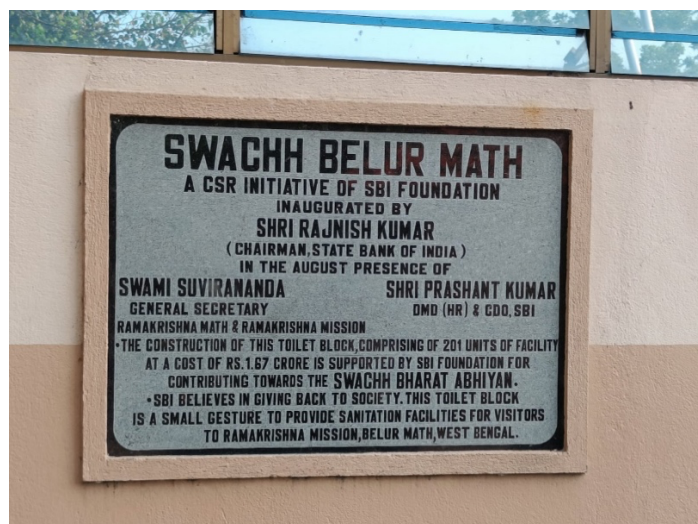

Fig. 6. Marble placard on the toilet block (Author's own).

Fig. 7. Toilets under PRASAD scheme at Belur Math (Author's Own).

In the context of the main large toilet block, my interlocuter also pointed out that though one needs to pay a token of one rupee for maintenance purposes, the way it is managed and kept clean is impressive. In this context, it is useful to refer to anthropologist Lynn Meskell, who, in commenting on the token fee for using toilets (as a part of BJP's campaign), observes that the "temples and toilets" program is not really intended to address the basic needs of ordinary people. It is, rather, intended to service the needs of fee-paying tourists in an effort to promote a burgeoning, branded international industry.[36] The math caters to a middle-class devotee base and draws international visitors, so well-maintained toilets and sanitation facilities are important for making the site visit amenable to them. The style of toilet also says a lot about the people it is intended for. Western style toilets usually feature a toilet seat much like a chair as opposed to the Indian style of squatting. One of my lay devotee interlocuters had a particularly insightful comment regarding the toilet block. He remarked that the new toilet block was very "swanky," and commented that the pay-for-use system and the western style toilets might alienate people who are more used to traditional Indian style toilets (which are still predominant in India).[37]

In discussing the new toilet blocks, it's imperative to draw attention to an important aspect of Hindu sacred spaces. In the Hindu tradition, which is highly governed by ideas of ritual purity and pollution, certain spaces and acts are understood to be profane and are kept away from spaces considered to be sacred. Traditionally, toilets are viewed as ritually polluting, profane spaces, and are located outside Hindu sacred complexes. Although some Hindu temples might have several designated spots for people to wash their hands and feet for bodily purification before approaching the *garbha-griha* (sacred chamber housing the deity), toilets would be markedly absent from these spaces, and one would need to leave the temple premises in order to find one. Previously, the math followed similar tradition there were no toilets present within the math complex. This being said, my interlocuters seemed appreciative of the new toilet block and understood it to be far away from the sacred center – it was the convenience that mattered more to them than considerations of ritual purity.

Devotees' Responses

Walking around the math, it is hard not to notice the signage heavily advertising the PRASAD scheme and acknowledge the center's sponsorship. The signs, which are carefully inserted within the math landscape as a part of the new infrastructure, mark the developments as a political project. In reading the signage, it is noteworthy that the names appear in a hierarchical order. The onlookers' eyes are first drawn to the words highlighting that it is a Central Government of India project, followed by the State Government, and lastly Belur Math.

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36. Lynn Meskell, "Toilets First, Temples Second: Adopting Heritage in Neoliberal India." *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 27, no. 2 (2021), 165.
 Meskell's article takes its name from Modi's 2014 campaign slogan, "Toilets First, Temples Second," and demonstrates, through an examination of the historical heritage site of Red Fort, how the government scheme for the corporate sponsorship of national monuments and the financing infrastructure therein are entwined with Modi's Swachh Bharat [Clean India campaign]. Meskell argues that there is a significant distinction between the government's commitment to provide these basic services to communities and the enhancement of amenities at heritage sites that may generate revenue. She critiques that the project only "improve[s] the experience at high-profile 'ticketed' monuments with tourist potential," without actually fulfilling its stated goals of providing sanitation facilities for communities in need.
37. Interview with author, November 16, 2019.

The questions that arise here are: What does it mean when a government body invests in developing a Hindu religious shrine and prominently displays their patronage through signage? How have the lay devotees understood and reacted to this insertion of political signage within a religious space? Interestingly, the development of the site through new infrastructure by the central government was not really viewed as a political project by most of my interlocuters. In fact, apart from a few interlocuters, most were either dismissive or appeared to be unconcerned of any political agenda.[38] The most frequent (and similar) response I encountered from various lay devotees was an appreciation for the new developments and how the government patronage has benefitted the math. For instance, a lay-devotee had the following to say:

> The government has done quite a lot of work for Belur. The place was always nice to visit but now feels even more cleaner and you can feel the improvements walking inside [the premises]. The math needs money for maintenance, and it is great that the government is taking steps to maintain it.[39]

Even the hoardings were not seen as something unusual or out of place, and most of my interlocuters did not appear to question the political implications of the signages. As one of my interlocuters stated,

> Why should there be any political agenda when the hoardings mention the name of the State government and also Belur Math? They are crediting everyone involved with the project.[40]

By this statement, my interlocuter, a lay-devotee, implied that if it was indeed a political advertisement, it would not acknowledge any other parties and thereby dilute their contributions. What he is also indirectly referring to is the tension between the regional state government (the Trinamool Congress led by Mamata Banerjee) and the central government (the BJP led by Modi), both of whom are antagonistic to each other. This reluctance to interpret the hoardings as a political move – as either the Mission partnering up with the government or the government exercising a political agenda – was something I noted in my other interactions with lay-devotees, along with an aversion to making any direct political connections between the math's development and political agendas. While many of my informants cited the math's self-reported apolitical stance in dismissing any suggestion of the monks' holding any political alliances, a few interlocuters were more pragmatic, noting that the government's patronage was not necessarily a bad thing, as it provided funding to the math/Mission and helped with its maintenance. As one of my interlocuters, a male lay-devotee, put it,

> Given Modi's soft-corner for the math, it is not a surprise that Belur Math got so much funding and new developments. But it would be foolish to reject funding just because it can be seen as government advertising. The bigger picture is that they [the monks] are getting funding […]. And we are getting to enjoy it [the developments]. Donations can come from many places and if it is put to good use, why should it be an issue? The math is getting money and help with maintenance […]. And the monks do not even vote or ask us to vote for any party.[41]

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38. This being said, it is important to note that my fieldwork was being conducted in late 2019, before the December 14, 2019, enactment of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), a development which may have somewhat shifted the public perception.
39. Interview with author, December 29, 2019.
40. Interview with author, November 7, 2019.
41. Interview with author, February 9, 2019.

In referring to "Modi's soft corner for the math," my interlocuter was pointing to Modi's personal history with the math, and thus seemed to consider the patronage of the math by the BJP as quite natural. But what is interesting to note here is the following: my interlocuter was aware that the signages could be interpreted as "government advertising," but, at the same time, maintained that it was reasonable for the practical need for funding to override concerns about political advertising. The lack of interest in interpreting the political implications of the (heavily advertised) government-sponsored infrastructural developments, along with the more general acceptance of this political influence in the religious domain, can also be explained by Meera Nanda's notion of the "banality of Hindu nationalism."[42] As Nanda states,

> The banal, everyday Hindu religiosity is simultaneously breeding a banal, everyday kind of Hindu nationalism. This kind of nationalism is not openly proclaimed in fatwas, nor does it appear on the election manifestos of political parties. Its power lies in structuring the common sense of ordinary people.[43]

Nanda's notion highlights how everyday Hindu religiosity produces an inconspicuous kind of Hindu nationalism, which, in turn, surreptitiously influences public opinion and creates shifts in how people understand political propaganda. As useful as this notion is, I argue that in the case of the math, it does not capture the whole picture – the devotees' appreciation for the new infrastructure developments, as well as their acceptance of the signage acknowledging the BJP's role in these developments, must also be analysed in light of Bengal's unique political situation.

While trying to justify the signages and the investment of central government in developing the math, a male lay-devotee touched upon an interesting point in this regard:

> Belur Math received the funding for tourism development way back in 2016–2017. There were no elections around the corner. And moreover, this religious tourism project is being done all over the country, not just in Bengal […]. And even if they did it to win elections, they [BJP] are not ignoring us [Bengalis] like Congress at least.[44]

First, I would like to draw attention to the phrase "they [the BJP] are not ignoring us like Congress." In the post-independence era, the state of West Bengal has had a complex and often antagonistic relationship with the center, led by Congress, leading to a popular perception that the province has lost out on major industrial development and growth due to "discrimination" by the center.[45] It is well documented that the state has

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42. Meera Nanda, *The God Market* (New York: NYU Press, 2011), 139.
43. Nanda, *The God Market*, 140.
44. Interview with author, January 14, 2019.
45. The economic stagnation and deindustrialization of Bengal has been a topic of debate among scholars, with most suggesting that a combination of factors – including the CPI(M) government's own policy failures and the central government's biased policies towards the state – have contributed to Bengal's economic problems. See Amiya Kumar Bagchi, "Studies on the economy of West Bengal Since Independence," *Economic and Political Weekly* (1998): 2973–2978.

> To give a brief background, after the general election in 1967, the Indian National Congress (INC) lost its dominant position in several states. In order to maintain its hegemonic influence, the Congress party increasingly used centralized provisions of the Constitution to suppress opposition parties. Additionally, the era of centralized planning meant that the federal fiscal policies were also centralized, leading to a concentration of resources in the hands of the central government. This was often used to favor states that supported the Congress party and, allegedly, to discriminate against those that did not. The CPI(M), along with other regional parties, spoke out against the unitary bias of the Constitution and the central government's policy of unequal distribution of resources to states ruled by

experienced significant economic stagnation and decline, particularly in the industrial sector, compared to other states such as Maharashtra, Gujrat, Delhi and even Tamil Nadu.[46] The highly visible signages crediting the central government for the infrastructural changes, along with the development of tourism initiatives, reinforce in the public consciousness that the central government is committed to developing the region through the development of religious tourism, particularly as the public memory of the being shunned by the center is still very alive.[47]

Another important theme touched upon by this interlocuter relates to how the math is tied to a specific cultural and regional identity: Bengali-Hindu. As the center channels funds to develop the math, it is thus seen by the devotional community as a positive step, one where their cultural and regional (and perhaps religious) identity is recognized and protected. As Michael Gillian has argued, the BJP's utilization of Bengali cultural heroes/icons was a deliberate step in regional political campaigning to reinforce its cultural integration and appeal to the Bengali-Hindu middle-class population, "a group that has long been held to have an ambivalent and complex historical relationship in regard to an over-arching national identity."[48] By developing the math, a religious institution founded by Vivekananda, the BJP-led central government is arguably utilizing the same strategy to appeal to the middle-class Hindu-Bengali population, a regional mobilization strategy to make in-roads in Bengal's regional political landscape. In the next section, I will sketch out this argument out.

Patronage of the Math and Regional Politics

Historically, the BJP has not had much of a presence – or even much "organizational strength" – in West Bengal.[49] However, things have changed, and by the 2019 Lok Sabha (state) elections, the BJP won eighteen seats and a staggering 40% of votes cast, thus emerging as a major opponent to Trinamool Congress (which won twenty-two seats and 43% of the votes cast).[50]

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opposition parties, which the CPI(M) pointed out led to a major drop in Bengal's position as a high-income state to a mid-low level between 1960s to 90s. For more on this, see: Polly Datta, "The Issue of Discrimination in Indian Federalism in the Post-1977 Politics of West Bengal," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 25, no. 2 (2005): 449–464; Jonathan Rodden and Steven Wilkinson, "The Shifting Political Economy of Redistribution in the Indian Federation," paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Society for New Institutional Economics, Tucson, Arizona, September 30–October 3, 2004, https://dspace.mit.edu/bitstream/handle/1721.1/18135/rodden.wilkinson.isnie2004.pdf?sequence=1.

Polly Datta, in examining the CPI(M)'s policies and contentious relationship with the center, notes that the introduction of market-based economic reforms in the 1990s reduced centralized control over the economy and allowed some degree of autonomy to the states. As a result, demands for greater power to the states (that were previously demanded, especially by the CPI(M)) became less important, rendering accusations of politically motivated "discrimination" by the central government almost irrelevant. In the light of this developments, Datta argues that the "politics of discrimination," had become a political propaganda tool to gather support for its "anti-Centre" movement, especially throughout the 1980s and until the mid-1990s. See Datta, "The Issue of Discrimination."

46. For more, see Jùrgen Dige Pedersen, "India's Industrial Dilemmas in West Bengal," *Asian Survey* 41, no. 4 (2001): 646–668, https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2001.41.4.646.

47. Even though somewhat historically true, in the recent past this was further used as a deliberate political tool by the CPI(M), consolidating in public consciousness the "discriminatory" policy of the center, a discrimination held responsible for the economic stagnation and underdevelopment of the region.

48. Gillian, "Bengal's Past and Present," 384.

49. See Suman Nath and Subhasish Ray, "Political Campaigning in West Bengal: Violence, Professionalization, and Communalisation," *South Asian History and Culture* 13, no. 3 (2022): 305–332.

50. See "2019 Indian General Election in West Bengal," Wikipedia, last modified May 13, 2025, 09:14 (UTC), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2019_Indian_general_election_in_West_Bengal.

Scholars Suman Nath and Subhasish Ray, in studying the BJP's steady rise in Bengali politics, highlight that by 2017–2018 (as the party's interest in Bengal grew), the party utilized temple organizations and cultural fronts – such as Durga Vahini, Durga Shakti, and Hindu Samhati among others[51] – to infiltrate the region and mobilize and "canvas support" for themselves.[52] However, as Nath and Ray observe, these smaller right-wing organizations "did not canvas support for the party openly;" rather, the mobilization was done in a covert and inconspicuous manner, cleverly subsumed in the everyday lives of the public.[53] As Ray and Nath further state:

> They stepped into people's everyday lives through temples and other dimensions of devotion – celebrating different Hindu festivals, organizing fitness and yoga training camps, etc. – to gradually embed themselves in the apparently apolitical domain of the public sphere.[54]

The authors here are referring to how the public activities of these small-scale organizations have acted to covertly promote the BJP and RSS's ideology by mobilizing the masses for political purposes through identity-based polarization. What is important to note is how these right-wing organizations emphasize the "apolitical domain of the public sphere," an emphasis maintained in order to insert themselves in various narratives of identity-based polarization.[55] I suggest that this holds true with the example of the math, as historically, not only has the religious organization kept itself away from politics, but in fact has emphatically promoted their apolitical status by regularly reminding the public that the monks abstain from voting in elections.

To clarify, I am not saying that patronage of the math was the sole determining factor in the political party becoming a major force in the region. However, as my interactions with people revealed, the material developments of the math did help the BJP receive support from the Bengali-Hindu community and somewhat influence public opinion in the party's favor. It was also widely advertised in regional newspapers that the math has been selected to receive funding amounting to Rs. 30 crores by the central

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51. These organizations are all a part of Sangh Parivar, an interconnected network of right-wing Hindu organizations sharing the common ideological foundation of Hindutva. For instance, the Durga Vahini (Army of Durga) is the women's wing of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), whose founder is Sadhvi Rithambara, accused of inciting communal violence in the Babri Masjid demolition (but acquitted in 2020).
52. Nath and Ray, "Political Campaigning in West Bengal," 316.
53. Nath and Ray, "Political Campaigning in West Bengal," 316.
54. Nath and Ray, "Political Campaigning in West Bengal," 316. Nath and Ray draw this particular insight from Tariq Thachil's observations. For more see, Thachil, Tariq, "Embedded Mobilization: Nonstate Service Provision as Electoral Strategy in India," *World Politics* 63, no. 3 (2011): 434–469.
55. There is another important aspect we need to consider vis-à-vis the "identity-based" mobilization utilized by the BJP, one that is particular to Bengali regional politics. According to a census report in 2011, Muslims comprise about twenty-seven per cent of the state's population – nearly double of the national average of fourteen per cent. Mamata Banerjee, the Chief Minister of Bengal, is often criticized by the BJP opposition party for her pro-Muslim and anti-Hindu policies, who label her as an appeaser of minorities for votes.

As Nath and Ray note, pro-BJP organizations and BJP IT cells have played an active role in further perpetuating the (false) notion that Hindus are under threat in West Bengal, for example by circulating messages over WhatsApp which state things such as "Hindus are in danger in West Bengal," or which project Mamata Banerjee as "Mumtaz Begum." In fact, as the scholars note, by 2016, BJP's IT cells had actively circulated the "completely fabricated" news that West Bengal was transforming into a "mini Pakistan." Unfortunately, the news gathered huge momentum and captured public imagination, resulting in a new phase of Hindu-Muslim polarization. See Nath and Ray, "Political Campaigning in West Bengal," 312.

government,[56] which reinforced in public consciousness that the development of the math was due to central government initiatives.

Accordingly, there are regional political implications of the BJP's patronage of the math that we cannot overlook. While the BJP has routinely used Bengali icons as a part of its political campaign for Bengal's state elections – a practice that began in the late 1990s and early 2000s[57] – the patronage of the math from 2016–2017 onwards can be interpreted as a material expression of the party's broader strategic push to appeal to Bengali-Hindus by developing the math, a symbol of Bengal's religious heritage, and, simultaneously, as an assurance to the public that the center is invested in the region's economic development through religious tourism. In other words, the prominent signage and the hoardings all over the math advertising the patronage by the central government can be read as efforts to impress upon the public consciousness (especially the Bengali-Hindu middle-class visitors who form the main devotee base of the math) that the government is committed to preserving institutions representing Bengali cultural heritage. As scholars Suman Nath and Ray put it, "political campaigns do not occur in a vacuum; rather they are blended with people's everyday lives."[58] And at the regional level, as my interactions with visitors/devotees of the math reveals, the BJP's patronage of the math – which took concrete steps to preserve the material legacy of the region's most venerated cultural-religious icons, Ramakrishna and Vivekananda – did play a role in shaping the public perception of the party in a favorable light.[59]

Narendra Modi, Ramakrishna Mission, and Belur Math

It is important to provide a brief background of Narendra Modi's political profile to understand why an alliance with the Ramakrishna Mission is beneficial – perhaps even required – for his public image. As chief minister of Gujrat, Modi was accused of a state-sponsored pogrom against Muslims in an event widely known as the 2002 Gujrat riots, one of the largest incitements of religious violence against minorities in contemporary India. In 2012, before he announced his plans to run for the prime minister's office, he was cleared by a Supreme-Court appointed Special Investigation Team (SIT) investigating his role in the religious violence. Despite being cleared, he still needed to remake his public image and slowly shift the public perception of him from an enabler of religious-violence to a spiritual man who holds Swami Vivekananda as an ideal. In other words, he sought to rehabilitate his tarnished public image through a spiritual makeover of sorts, one which framed him not as a persecutor of minorities, but rather has a spiritually-minded politician guided by Swami Vivekananda's ideals.

Scholars such as Ian Hall have already discussed Modi's appropriation of Vivekananda,[60] which, as just indicated, began at a national level when he was preparing his campaign to become a potential prime ministerial candidate, while still holding the post of chief minister of Gujrat. A noticeable shift occurred

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56. See Debasish Konar, "Central Grants Rs 30 Crore for Beautification Project of Belur Math," *The Times of India*, January 25, 2017, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/debashis/-central-grants-rs-30-crore/articleshow/56766237.cms.
57. See Gillan, "Bengal's Past and Present."
58. Nath and Ray, "Political Campaigning in West Bengal," 317.
59. A similar conclusion has been drawn by Rana P. B. Singh, Pravin S. Rana and Sarvesh Kumar, who analysed the BJP-led implementation of the PRASAD scheme at two popular pilgrimage centers (Ayodhya and Varanasi) and concluded that the government initiatives of religious-tourism development and selective choices of particular religious sites have more to do with identity-politics than with the simple maintenance or physical preservation of the site for "secular" purposes of tourism growth. See Rana P. B. Singh, Pravin S. Rana, and Sarvesh Kumar, "Hinduism, Heritagization, and Holy Cities in India."
60. See Hall, "Narendra Modi and India's Normative Power."

from January 2012 onward, when he began to cultivate "a softer public image," shifting from an aggressive hard-line nationalist to a *vikas purush* (developed man). [61] During this period, he increasingly appealed to the figure of Swami Vivekananda by invoking him in speeches, and, between January 2012 to January 2013, posted Vivekananda's quotes daily on social networking sites.[62] Though scholars have mainly noted Modi's appropriation of Vivekananda and his teachings, the alliance goes far beyond that. Modi's relationship with the math and its monks has received significant press coverage and publicity, most notably after his ascension to the Prime Minister's office in 2014. There has been a slew of publicizations by the media on Modi's close association with Belur Math, and in particular his association with the last President of the Mission, Swami Atmasthananda,[63] who has been prominently featured in the media as Modi's spiritual guide and guru.[64]

Modi has also publicly flaunted his personal relationship with the monks of the Mission at every opportunity and expressed how visiting the math is akin to "homecoming" for him.[65] In 2017, to mark the death of Swami Atmasthananda, Modi tweeted a photo of himself sitting on the floor, at the feet of Swami Atmasthananda, with the swami's hand on his (Fig. 8). In the tweet, Modi refers to the swami's death as a "personal loss."[66] Taken in 2013, the picture was widely used by the media to report on the close association between the high ranking monk and Modi.[67] What is important here is the public visibility of the image, a politically powerful leader sitting at the feet of his guru, a high-ranking monk in a transnational faith-based organization. In the public consciousness/psyche, the image worked to humanize the contentious/controversial Modi (Gujrat riots), now seen as a disciple, established in a *guru-shishya* tradition, humbly sitting on the floor at the feet of his guru. The images of Modi surrounded by monks in saffron (Fig. 8, Fig. 9) along with the narrative of his personal connection with the head of the math – who offered him support and blessings – not only presents the prime minister in a spiritual light, but also establishes him as a political leader approved by the monk community of a prestigious transnational faith organization recognized by UNESCO for their efforts to promote the principles of tolerance and non-violence in assisting disadvantaged groups. By associating himself with the monks of the Mission and becoming a patron of the math, I argue that Modi is implicitly instilling in public consciousness that he is amenable to religious tolerance and inter-religious understandings, as these are cornerstones of

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61. Hall, "Narendra Modi and India's Normative Power," 124.
62. "The Tale of Two Narendras: Narendra Modi and Swami Vivekananda," *The Statesman*, July 4, 2016, https://www.thestatesman.com/india/the-tale-of-two-narendras-narendra-modi-and-swami-vivekananda-152114.html.
63. Swami Atmasthananda served as the President of Ramakrishna Mission from 2007–2017.
64. Rupak Banerjee, "Modi Wanted to be Ramakrishna Monk, Rejected Thrice," *The Times of India*, April 10, 2013, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/modi-wanted-to-be-ramakrishna-monk-rejected-thrice/articleshow/19468165.cms.
65. Rupak Banerjee, "Belur 'Homecoming': PM Narendra Modi Visits, Mediates in Swamiji's Room, Pays Tribute to Ramakrishna," *The Times of India*, January 13, 2020, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/belur-homecoming-pm-visits-meditates-in-swamijis-room-pays-tribute-to-ramakrishna/articleshow/73218815.cms.
66. "Ramakrishna Mission Chief Swami Atmasthananda Passes Away, PM Modi Calls it 'Personal Loss,'" *NDTV*, June 19, 2017, https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/ramakrishna-mission-chief-swami-atmasthananda-passes-away-pm-modi-calls-it-personal-loss-1713913.
67. Aaj Tak, "Vishesh: Modi To Visit His Guru Atmasthananda," YouTube video, 12:37, May 4, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nx_mD-hn65Y.

Vivekananda's teachings and also ideological cornerstones of the Ramakrishna Mission, itself epitomized as the "harmony of religions."[68]

Fig. 8. Narendra Modi at the feet of Swami Athmasthananda at Belur Math.

Fig. 9. Narendra Modi at Belur Math, featured on his official website.

68. Inspired by Vedanta, Vivekananda established the *harmony of religions* ideology, which has been incorporated into the organization's broader ideological framework. But in contemporary popular parlance, this notion has been distorted into a peculiar secular interpretation of the site. In the Indian context "secular" is understood as tolerance/respect for all religions, and the secular and inclusive character of the math is often promoted by the organization itself, which publicizes that the math includes within its organizational fold, ordained monks, from Christian, Buddhist and even Islamic traditions. See "Deeply Hurtful: Ramakrishna Mission Monks Upset Over PM Modi's CAA Pitch at Belur Math," *India Today*, January 13, 2020, https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/deeply-hurtful-ramakrishna-mission-monks-upset-pm-modi-caapitch-be lurmath-1636431-2020-01-13.

The Ramakrishna Mission has earned global fame and international recognition for its humanitarian work and promotion of religious harmony. For instance, in 2002, the organization was awarded the UNESCO–Madanjeet Singh Prize in recognition of its promotion of tolerance and non-violence. In 2006, the organization also received M Jalaluddin Rumi International Award for Universal Peace, Tolerance and Harmony by the Interfaith Harmony Foundation of India, Delhi, as well the National Communal Harmony Award in recognition of its outstanding contribution towards the promotion of communal harmony and national integration.[69] By associating himself with the Mission[70] – an organization publicly perceived as peaceful, harmonious, and religiously-tolerant – and, moreover, by publicly referencing Vivekananda's teachings and highlighting his deep reverence for the monks of the mission, Modi has been able to reinvent his public image – so much so that, in 2019, the BJP managed to win the national elections giving Modi a second chance at the prime minister's office. Therefore, it an be argued that his association with the Ramakrishna Mission has not only helped to transform his public image, but also to sanctify his controversial domestic policies that follow a Hindutva ideology: whether the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), the persecution of minorities, or even the cow vigilante violence that has erupted in many BJP-led states.

Entanglement of Religion and Politics in the Context of Ramakrishna Mission

Under Modi's political rule, the religious organization has also gained privileges through various governmental schemes and projects showing the strategic partnership between the two parties. For instance, in 2005, when Modi was the chief minister of Gujrat, the historical building sanctified by the stay of Vivekananda was formally handed over by the Government of Gujarat to the Ramakrishna Mission. Modi himself handed over the official documents of the site to his supposed spiritual guru Swami Atmasthananda. During Modi's rule at the center, the Ramakrishna Mission has expanded its centers throughout India, and in Gujrat, three more centers have opened up including the Vadodara one. In 2015–2016, the Union Cabinet, chaired by prime minister Modi, approved the allotment of a plot of land in central Delhi and accelerated the proceedings for the organization to take over the land.

For Belur Math and the Ramakrishna Mission, being endorsed by the most powerful political leader of the country gave them immense media coverage and prestige. From time to time, the monks of the organization have given press interviews commenting on the prime minister's closeness with the math and Vivekananda, especially since he assumed the post of prime minister. In fact, it was not just Modi, but the religious organization itself that perpetuated the narrative of the ascetic tendencies of the prime minister and his affiliation with Belur Math and Vivekananda, affirming Modi's personal relationship with Swami Atmasthananda as his mentor and spiritual guide. A newspaper article titled "Modi's Belief in Vive-

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69. See "Special Awards to the Organization as a Whole," Belur Math Awards and Honours, accessed March 29, 2022, https://belurmath.org/about-us/awards-and-honours/.

70. As Christophe Jaffrelot (writing about Indira Gandhi) has argued, "Though such relationships might seem to form part of the 'hidden face' of power, politicians like Mrs. Gandhi in fact see them as a resource. They are not only considered legitimate, they are necessary for political legitimacy" (70). He continues, "The ritualized form of these encounters is worth highlighting here. They should preferably take place in the *ashram of the guru* (emphasis in original); the politician must make the effort of going there. The politician begins by kissing the master's feet, the appropriate form of address of an inferior to his superior, and receives in exchange a blessing by the gesture of a hand over his head. Whatever happens to follow is, at best, unimportant; the essential point is to receive this blessing, the *darshan* (vision) (emphasis in original) of the guru, and to be seen at his side." See Jaffrelot, "The Political Guru," 67, 83.

kananda's Teachings Enthuse Ramakrishna Mission Monks" was published in 2014 in a national Indian English-language newspaper, where Swami Suparnananda, one of the monks of the organization, commented that Modi's faith in Swamiji's vision of religious harmony and unity is "commendable,"[71] thus showing their subtle endorsement of the political leader. The comment was also ironic, considering Modi's penchant for a hardline nationalistic strand of politics, the serious allegations of administering a pogrom against Muslim minorities, and his recourse to violence to suppress dissent. But it acts as an important indicator of how the math monks also play a role in advancing the narrative of Modi being influenced by Vivekananda's philosophy of religious harmony. It can be said that the interests of the religious institution and the political leader are similar in a way: garnering prestige, national-level publicity, and increase in revenue by attracting more visitors and funding; similarly for the political leader/party, it's about prestige, being endorsed by a religious institution known for their advocation of religious harmony and tolerance.

Conclusion

In her monograph, *The God Market: How Globalization is Making India more Hindu* (2011), Meera Nanda writes that:

> The state-temple-corporate complex is creating new institutionalized spaces where Hinduism is renewing itself so as it remains relevant to the new social context created by the global political economy. […] This process of converting ritual spaces into politicized public spaces is so commonplace, so banal, and so much a part of our collective common sense that it goes unnoticed – and unchecked.[72]

As Nanda notes, in contemporary India, the government and religious institutions – along with the corporate sector – have started to form alliances or a collaborative partnership, something that is proving to be mutually advantageous. As I have demonstrated in this article, the Belur Math (and more broadly the Mission), have benefitted from their close association with the political leader Narendra Modi, be it through publicity or allocation of resources. The selection of the math under the central government's PRASAD scheme has led to major infrastructural developments at the site, transforming the sacred space and offering visitors/lay devotees several modern amenities – such as access to well-maintained toilets, filtered water taps, an organized commercial pilgrimage market economy, and even digital technology (LED screens) for higher engagement with worshipping rituals. The math has always catered to the middle-class population, and it is no coincidence that is the same group who the BJP/Modi targets, as well as finds support in, for their nationalist ideology and projects.[73] The emerging middle-class of India, marked by the particularities discussed above, have become an important public group whose expectations and desires for amenities and conveniences are prioritized and addressed by the managers of the religious site as well as by the political party, as strategic moves for their own sustenance. Nevertheless, as my fieldwork interviews also reveal, while the lay devotees/visitors appreciate the new developments, all of the amenities are not uniformly perceived as fulfilling essential needs. For instance, although the LED screens provide visitors an

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71. "Modi's Believe in Vivekananda's Teachings Enthuse Ramakrishna Mission Monks," *Business Standard*, May 17, 2014, https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/modi-s-belief-in-vivekananda-s-teachings-enthuse-ramakrishna-mission-monks-114051700704_1.html.

72. Nanda, *The God Market,* 108–109.

73. See Christophe Jaffrelot and Peter van der Veer, eds. *Patterns of Middle-Class Consumption in India and China* (Delhi: SAGE Publications India, 2008).

opportunity to participate in the worshipping rituals without entering the crowded prayer hall, devotees still prefer the multisensorial experience of the performance, despite the crowded environment. The toilet-block is not free but pay-to-use, which goes to show that its real purpose is to offer convenience and to enhance the experience of the middle-class visitors at the site who are willing to pay a fee to access well-maintained toilets.

It is not just these modernizing elements that transform the religious space of the math, but also the accompanying hoardings and signages crediting the patrons – central and state government bodies – which show how the religious space has been politicized. What is interesting to note is the response of the lay-devotees of the math, who, as ordinary citizens, expressed a quiet acceptance of this political intrusion into religious space of the math, and even offered justifications for it. Through field interviews, I saw how the devotees/visitors of the math favorably viewed the central government (by extension BJP/Modi) for developing the site and how they did not seem to reflect much concern for the implications of these political hoardings. Meera Nanda's assertion of "banal nationalism" is very much applicable in this context, where nationalism perforates everyday spaces in such innocuous ways that the public comes to accept it as a part of their daily lives. Nevertheless, I assert that there are two aspects at work within this particular context (i.e., the quiet acceptance of the political branding of the religions site). First, it is not that the lay devotees/visitors are unaware of the political advertisements. Rather, these lay devotees accept it as part of a pragmatic move for funding, which helps the religious organization to maintain the site. With respect to those who lack interest in questioning the math monks' complicity with political parties, this seems to arise from the math's consistent portrayal of its apolitical stand, a narrative they periodically emphasize through newspaper articles, and which the lay devotees I spoke with apparently take at face value.

Nevertheless, the politicization of the math can be read as a mobilization tool for the Modi-led BJP government, at both a regional and national level. By entering into a (covert) alliance with the religious institution, the BJP has benefitted in several ways. As I have shown through my fieldwork, through patronage of the math, the central government did elicit a favorable response from the local Bengali-Hindu devotional community, who appreciated the modernization of the site by the center. The redevelopment of the site appears to be paying politicians dividends too, as evidenced by the results of the 2021 state elections, where the BJP emerged as the main opposition to the Trinamool Congress, managing to capture far more seats in the region than ever before in the history of the party. The continued validity of Modi's appropriation of Vivekananda is contingent on the support and validation of the people of Bengal, where the monk was born and is highly esteemed as a cultural icon. Modi has fashioned his image on Vivekananda's teachings, and therefore cannot afford to not have the support of Bengalis, as it would cast doubt on the legitimacy of his carefully revamped image aligned with that of the monk/saint. Perhaps this factor makes it more important for BJP/Modi to make political in-roads in Bengal and enter into an alliance with the religious institution founded by Vivekananda.

The relationship between temple authorities and the government, particularly when bound by patronage and endowments, is complex. Given the current government's predisposition towards religious nationalism, a strategic alliance between the political party and a religious organization is not unexpected, and benefits both parties – while the political leader is afforded legitimacy via the backing of a powerful transnational religious organization, the organisation itself has enjoyed an increase in prestige, power, and funding. In the case of the organization, we can see how the Mission has benefited due to its perceived closeness with the prime minister – through both media publicity and more tangibly through material concessions in the form of fast-tracked land allotments and funding for development. In turn, the monks have publicly endorsed the political leader, highlighted his closeness with senior monks, and perpetuated

the narrative of his desires to be a part of the monastic order. In the end, religious organizations do not function in isolation, but need economic resources and funding to attract more devotees/followers which ultimately generates revenues, makes expansion possible, and elevates prestige. Therefore, political diplomacy becomes a requirement in such cases to navigate the waters carefully maintaining relations with political leaders, something that the Mission monks have managed till now. But recent developments are threatening to expose the carefully concealed political relations of the monks and their political alliances.

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