Divine leaders, mundane politics: the political economy of Gurus in India

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Abstract

How does political involvement shape religious leaders' ability to attract followers? I address this question in the context of Hinduism in India. Hinduism is the world's third-largest religion, and Hindu religious leaders (Gurus) play an increasingly visible role in Indian politics and society, yet little empirical work in the social sciences has examined how Hindu religious leaders gain followers and the role of political connections in this process. To address these gaps, I conduct an original survey with an embedded, ethnographically-informed religious-leader conjoint experiment among religious pilgrims at the world's largest religious gathering. I find that followers systematically value Gurus' asceticism, service provision, and ability to cater to a diverse community but show no systematic preferences based on communication style or spiritual emphasis. Turning to political involvement, I distinguish between *political visibility*–visible connections between religious and political leaders–and *political coordination*–strategically organizing followers to support specific candidates. In line with findings on Christian and Muslim leaders, Hindu believers dislike political visibility among their leaders, but this does not extend to strategic political coordination. At the same time, believers recognize the importance of political involvement to successful service provision by religious leaders and distinguish between leaders who seek political influence for service versus personal gain. Since believers value social services provided by religious leaders, they may be willing to forgive political involvement by religious leaders because of service provision, despite their distaste for the blending of religion and politics. These findings shed light on the political economy of Hindu leadership and nuance scholarly understanding of how religious followers evaluate religious leaders' political connections.

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1 Introduction

Religious leaders have long played an important role in mundane political affairs. In the past, priests legitimized rulers and often checked their accumulation of power (Chaney, 2013; Mlecko, 1982; Rubin, 2017), contributing to the formation of modern states (Grzymala-Busse, 2020, 2024). In the present, religious leaders continue to influence politics and policy (Baldwin, 2026; Djupe and Gilbert, 2008; Grzymała-Busse, 2015; Nielsen, 2017; Trejo, 2012; Tunon, n.d.). While they are often primarily concerned with *winning souls*-gaining and retaining devoted followers–religious leaders are also frequently deeply involved in politics, supporting candidates, highlighting issues, and influencing voters and policy. This is the case even though religious followers across traditions often express a dislike of religious leader's political involvement, and politicization has been shown in several contexts to negatively impact religiosity and religious leaders' perceived authority (Djupe, Neiheisel, and Conger, 2018; Djupe, Neiheisel, and Sokhey, 2018; Gill, 2017; Grzymała-Busse, 2015; Hout and Fischer, 2002; Patrikios, 2008; Williamson et al., 2023, Folsz & Łucek, 2026).

That religious leaders often continue to seek political and policy influence–not only through back-channels but openly–despite followers' preferences to the contrary thus constitutes an important puzzle in the study of religion and politics. This article addresses this question through a focus on followers' decisions about which leaders to follow: in other words, the demand side of the religious marketplace. Canonical models of the economics of religion posit that religious leaders seek to maximize their ability to *win souls*, or in other words to attract followers to their organization (Finke and Stark, 1998; Iannaccone, 1992, 1994). How does political involvement by religious leaders in democracies shape their ability to retain and attract followers?

I argue that far from hindering religious leaders' ability to attract followers, political involvement can–under the right conditions–increase religious leaders' efficacy in attracting followers. The key variable mediating the relationship is *social service provision*. I argue that religious followers value social service provision by their leaders, such as the provision

of healthcare and education or simple financial or logistical aid, and that service provision helps religious leaders gain an aura of virtue and attract followers. Yet service provision at scale often implicates religious leaders in the state, especially in contexts marked by pervasive patronage. To navigate the state and secure their ability to provide service, religious leaders often seek and exercise political influence (Baldwin, 2026). Followers dislike political involvement by leaders but simultaneously recognize that such involvement is critical to service provision. They are willing to countenance forms of political influence that are framed as compatible with notions of serving the flock, as opposed to the personal aggrandizement of leaders. This theory helps explain why religious leaders seek and often achieve political influence with few penalties despite followers' dislike of the mingling of the spiritual and political.

I advance this argument in the context of Hinduism in India. Hinduism is the world's third-largest religion, with roughly 1.2 billion adherents. In recent decades, the rise of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party in India has brought Hinduism to the forefront of the country's politics (Hansen, 1999; Jaffrelot, 1996). Hindu religious leaders have become more visibly involved in politics, as evidenced most starkly by the election in 2017 of the Hindu cleric Yogi Adityanath as Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, India's largest and most politically consequential state. At the same time, Hindu religious institutions have grown in size and scope in the past few decades, reaching more of the faithful and providing a broader array of social services than ever before (Iyer, 2018).

Despite these important trends in the world's largest democracy, relatively little work in quantitative social science or the political economy of religion has examined the functioning of Hindu religious organizations and leadership and the connections between Hindu religious institutions and politics, though qualitative accounts of gurus political involvement exist, often focused on a single high-profile religious leader (Copeman and Ikegame, 2012; Copeman et al., 2023; Jaffrelot, 2012; Lucia, 2014, 2022; MacKean, 1996; Warrier, 2003). How do Hindu religious leaders gain followers? What role, if any, does political connectedness and

influence play in shaping the authority and reach of Hindu religious leaders?

This paper aims to fill this gap through novel descriptive and causal evidence. I combine in-depth qualitative interviews with Hindu religious leaders and followers in India with an original survey containing an embedded, ethnographically-informed religious-leader conjoint experiment conducted among religious pilgrims at the world's largest religious gathering. This approach generates rich descriptive data on the way Hindu religious leadership functions, building a body of initial evidence on a topic that has received relatively little empirical attention. The conjoint experiment also allows me to assess the causal impact of religious leader attributes on followers' preferences, generating unique insights into the drivers of followers' choices.

My findings reveal several important insights about the role of political connections in the marketplace for religious leadership in Hinduism. First, I find that followers systematically prefer gurus who demonstrate asceticism or renunciation, who have a diverse set of followers, and who provide their followers with social services like education. Second, I find that followers dislike visible displays of political connectedness by leaders, in line with findings in studies of Christian and Muslim leaders (Grzymała-Busse, 2015; Williamson et al., 2023). I also find that this distaste for visibly blending religion and politics does not extend to more covert vote coordination by leaders, toward which voters are indifferent. Third, I reveal that despite this dis-preference, followers in the context of India's patronage democracy recognize that effective service provision requires political connections and are more willing to endorse political activity by leaders framed as service-oriented. These attributes thus collide: effective service provision and demonstrations of asceticism can change followers' perceptions of their leaders' involvement in politics even though they prefer separation.

This paper makes two original contributions. First, it sheds light on the political economy of Hinduism, showing in particular what Hindu religious believers value in their religious leaders. This work thus complements extant work on the drivers of religious engagement and leadership choice focused on Christianity (Grzymała-Busse, 2015) and Islam (Williamson

et al., 2023) by providing evidence from Hinduism, the world's third-largest religion in terms of number of adherents that remains understudied in social science scholarship on religion, with negative implications for scholarly understanding of religion as a global phenomenon (Verghese, 2020).

Second, this paper contributes to literature on political involvement and influence by religious actors. Across religious traditions, followers prefer limited political involvement by religious leaders–a preference I show extends to Hinduism–yet religious leaders often seek and gain political influence. I highlight the importance of social service provision in incentivizing political involvement by religious leaders and changing how religious followers view political involvement. Furthermore, I differentiate between different types of political involvement, showing that followers' preferences differ across them.

Many religions, including Hinduism, valorize the provision of social services as a holy activity grounded in notions of service, or *Seva* in Hinduism (Chowdhury, 2025). Religious leaders who provide services are more popular than those who focus solely on spiritual activities, and service provision also provides an appealing means for religious leaders to ensure their own and their organizations' financial stability. Yet to provide social services effectively in a patronage democracy characterized by pervasive rent-seeking (Chandra, 2004), political connections are necessary. Religious followers recognize this, even though they otherwise prefer less politically-connected leaders. They are also indifferent to political coordination among followers, a key mechanism through which religious leaders can bargain with political leaders for support in social service provisioning.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. In the following two sections, I outline the theory underlying this paper, drawing on literature from the political economy of religion and social service provision. I then provide background on religious leadership in Hinduism and the role of Gurus in India's religious landscape. The subsequent section introduces my research design, rooted in ethnographic observation, after which I present my findings. Following a brief theoretical discussion, I conclude.

2 Drivers of supply and demand in religious marketplaces

A useful starting point for theorizing about gurus' behavior is the broader literature on the political economy of religion, which models religious leaders as strategic actors operating within a competitive marketplace for adherents (Iannaccone, 1998). This literature typically assumes that religious leaders seek to maximize their following, whether for spiritual reasons such as the desire to win souls and propagate their teachings, or for material reasons such as the revenue, donations, and institutional resources that a larger base of followers brings. The framework is agnostic as to which of these motivations predominates in any given case; what matters is that, under either interpretation, religious leaders face strong incentives to attract and retain followers in a setting where potential adherents have meaningful choice among competing religious figures.

This framework carries two implications that structure the empirical analysis below. First, in domains where followers' preferences diverge, religious leaders should be expected to differentiate themselves from one another in order to capture distinct segments of the religious marketplace, much as firms differentiate their products to appeal to consumers with heterogeneous tastes. Second, in domains where followers share systematic preferences, religious leaders should be expected to converge on the favored attribute, since deviating from it would impose a competitive cost without a corresponding gain. Identifying which characteristics of religious leaders fall into each of these categories, then, offers insight not only into the preferences of followers themselves but also into the patterns of differentiation and convergence we should expect to observe across the population of gurus.

It follows that demand is essential to shaping religious leaders' behavior. The choices gurus make about how to present themselves, what activities to prioritize, and how to position themselves in relation to political and social institutions cannot be understood in isolation from the preferences of the followers they seek to attract. Even where religious leaders enjoy considerable autonomy in defining their own teachings and practices, the

competitive structure of the religious marketplace ensures that follower demand exerts a pervasive disciplining force on their behavior. Studying what followers want, then, is a necessary foundation for understanding why gurus behave as they do.

3 Service as a driver of religious leaders' involvement in politics

Building on this demand-side framework, I argue that the relationship between religious leadership, social service provision, and political involvement forms a coherent and mutually reinforcing system. Followers value social service provision by their leaders, whether in the form of healthcare, education, or more modest forms of financial and logistical assistance, and they reward leaders who undertake such activities with both increased adherence and an aura of moral virtue. Service provision is thus not merely a peripheral activity for religious leaders but a central avenue through which they cultivate legitimacy and expand their followings.

Yet social service provision at meaningful scale rarely takes place in isolation from the state. In a context marked by pervasive patronage and extensive state regulation of activities such as schooling, healthcare, and land use, religious leaders who seek to provide services find themselves repeatedly drawn into engagement with political actors. Permits must be obtained, regulations navigated, and resources secured, and each of these tasks is mediated by politicians who control access to the relevant levers of the state (Baldwin, 2026). To deliver services effectively, then, religious leaders often have little choice but to cultivate political connections. Politicians, for their part, have strong reasons to reciprocate. Religious leaders command large and devoted followings, possess significant social reach, and can shape the voting decisions of their adherents in ways that few other actors can match. Politicians thus actively seek out connections with religious figures, viewing such ties as a valuable resource for electoral mobilization. This creates a cyclical effect: political connections enable more effective service provision by leaders, service provision gains more devoted followers, and a

larger base of followers in turn makes religious leaders more attractive partners for politicians, deepening leaders' political connectedness.

Followers dislike overt political involvement by their religious leaders, viewing it as in tension with the spiritual detachment they expect such figures to embody, yet they also recognize, at least implicitly, that political engagement is often necessary for the service provision they value. The way religious leaders navigate this tension, I argue, is by signaling asceticism and framing political involvement as a form of *seva*, or selfless service to followers, rather than as a vehicle for personal aggrandizement. Visible markers of renunciation, such as simple living, the absence of family ties, and a personal style that distances the guru from worldly comfort, help reassure followers that political engagement is undertaken in their service rather than for the leader's own benefit. This framing allows religious leaders to capture the benefits of political connections while minimizing the reputational costs that overt political involvement would otherwise impose.

Taken together, this theory helps explain why religious leaders so often seek and achieve political influence with relatively few penalties, despite followers' professed discomfort with the mingling of the spiritual and the political. Far from being a liability, political involvement, when properly framed and accompanied by credible signals of asceticism and service, can serve as a powerful complement to religious leaders' efficacy in attracting and retaining followers.

4 Religious leadership in Hinduism

Hinduism is extraordinarily diverse, so much so that its status as a single religion has often been called into question. In a 1966 judgment, India's supreme court noted that that "unlike other religions in the world, the Hindu religion does not claim any one prophet, it does not worship any one God, it does not subscribe to any one dogma, it does not believe in any one philosophic concept, it does not follow any one set of religious rites or performances, in

fact, it does not appear to satisfy the narrow traditional features of any religion or creed." The term Hinduism entered common parlance only during British Colonialism in the late 1800s. Today, the term refers broadly to all non-Abrahamic belief systems indigenous to India excluding Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism, though at times controversies have raged within India about whether specific sects or groups are or are not Hindu. Hinduism tends to be defined more through orthopraxy (adherence to a common set of ritual practices) as opposed to orthodoxy (adherence to a common set of beliefs).

Given this immense diversity within Hinduism, it comes as no surprise that Hindu religious leadership is also extraordinarily diverse. Hindu religious leadership is divided between ritual specialists–Brahmin priests who specialize in executing rituals-and religious teachers/leaders, referred to variously as Gurus, Swamis, Sants, Sadhus, Acharyas, Yogis, Sants, and Godmen.[1] I adopt the term Guru as a general marker for spiritual leaders whose role goes beyond ritual specialization (Mlecko, 1982). While ritual specialists are typically Brahmins, a specific caste group that historically specialized in ritual, Gurus can and often do come from a variety of caste backgrounds besides Brahmins (Copeman et al., 2023; Ikegame, 2010).

A core concept in Hinduism is the Guru-Shishya Parampara, or the Master-Student tradition. The Guru-Shishya parampara describes a close relationship between a teacher (Guru) and student (Shishya) who practices devotion to the Guru in the spiritual path. The Guru-Shishya parampara often involves formal initiation, called *Guru Diksha*, in which a teacher-disciple relationship is formalized. This close one-on-one relationship and bond between an individual teacher and student along with the high degree of deference and respect expected from disciples toward their guru is a hallmark of the structure of Hindu religious leadership and a cultural form with wide resonance in Indian society, including in music, dance and other forms of traditional instruction.

Religious leaders in India are often affiliated with organizations, broadly referred to as *sansthas*. Religious sansthas take many forms, including mathas (monasteries), Sapradayas

[1]The delightful term "self-styled God-man" is regularly used to criticize gurus of dubious provenance and behavior, as any close reader of Indian news media will know.

(lineages), Ashrams (spiritual and retreat centers), and Akharas (organizations of ascetic renunciates). In many cases, an individual Guru heads the sanstha and exercises a high degree of control over the organizations function. In monasteries, for example, a mathadipathi–akin to an abbot–holds special power in the absence of any higher religious authority, and the lines between the organization and individual leader often blur (Simmons, 2023).

In many respects, Hinduism functions as a competitive religious marketplace, similar in some respects to protestant Christianity in that followers are able to choose freely among the many potential leaders on offer, each of whom offers a different spiritual emphasis and approach. Many Hindus acknowledge that this openness along with the diversity of their tradition allows followers to find ways of approaching their faith that resonate most deeply. As one guru told me during my fieldwork, paralleling the literature on religious competitions, 'When there's a tear in your clothes, you go to the market (bazaar) and find a tailor who can fix it for you. You eventually find one you trust, who you know does a good job. It is the same with us. When your soul is broken, you search for a guru who can fix it, and you find one that you trust."[2]

5 Gurus' political involvement

Historically, gurus, alongside priests and temples, played a central role as advisors to secular authorities and as ritual specialists who complemented and legitimized the rule of kings (Appadurai, 2008; Mlecko, 1982). During the colonial and post-colonial periods, the proximity between gurus and administrators declined as the state increasingly secularized its formal institutions. Yet gurus have steadily maintained, and at times expanded, their social and political influence over time. Indira Gandhi, for instance, was known to consult several gurus on a regular basis, some of whom became notably wealthy as a result of their proximity to power (Jaffrelot, 2012). With the rise of Hindu nationalism beginning in the

[2]Qualitative interview with religious leader. January 2025.

late 1980s, gurus' political prominence has risen once again, as state leaders openly consult and celebrate gurus and involve them in official state activities (Copeman et al., 2023; MacKean, 1996).

Today, the nature and extent of gurus' political involvement varies considerably. Many gurus meet regularly with politicians, and they often justify this engagement as a response to political outreach rather than as something they actively seek out. As one guru I interviewed during my qualitative work explained, "Many politicians come to me and seek my blessing. Who am I to say no to them? I will bless any spiritual seeker who comes to me."[3] At other times, partisan links are displayed far more openly. Figure 1 below contains images of various gurus, both well-known and obscure, prominently advertising their connections to politicians on signage and posters around the Kumbh Mela pilgrimage site.

Hindu religious leaders and the organizations they lead also play an important role as providers of social services. *Seva*, or service, is a central concept in Hinduism that captures the religious importance of social philanthropy and selfless action on behalf of others (Chowdhury, 2025). Religious organizations led by gurus undertake a wide variety of activities falling under the rubric of seva, ranging from the free distribution of food to devotees to the operation of schools, hospitals, health clinics, and homeless shelters, among many others. Iyer (2018) documents that the role of religious organizations in delivering social services has grown substantially over time, with such organizations frequently stepping in to fill gaps in public goods provision in a setting where the state often fails to deliver even basic services.

6 Research design

To understand how religious followers choose religious leaders and explore the role of political connections, I conducted an original survey of religious Hindus with an embedded forced-choice conjoint experiment. In surveying religious followers, I necessarily focus on

[3]Interview with religious leader, January 2025.

Figure 1: **Images of gurus with politicians at 2025 Kumbh Mela**



the demand side of the religious marketplace. To complement this demand-side focus with insights from the supply-side, I draw on secondary sources and original qualitative interviews with gurus and staff members of their organizations collected during fieldwork in India during 2022-26. Given the difficulty in reaching religious leaders and the importance of sustained, repeated interaction and credibility-building to gain information from them and their organizations, this sample of religious leaders is non-random and based largely on personal connections and snowball sampling. I use this qualitative evidence primarily to illustrate the incentives that leaders face and the logics underlying their behavior.

The religious follower survey was conducted at the 2025 Kumbh Mela, a major religious pilgrimage held approximately once every 3 years in one of four sacred cities. The gathering, which lasts approximately three months and brings pilgrims from throughout India, is centered on ritual immersion in sacred rivers. Rivers are sacred in Hinduism, and bathing in the rivers during the Kumbh Mela, especially on certain particularly holy days, is considered auspicious and a source of spiritual blessing. In addition to bathing in sacred rivers, the Kumbh Mela is also the site of a large-scale tent city. At the core of the tent city, a variety of religious leaders and religious organizations build erect their own camps, and these camps are sites where religious followers can interact with religious leaders and organizations through attending sermons, songs, performances, and rituals and meeting with leaders in groups or one-on-one.

Though the precise number of attendees at the Kumbh Mela in 2025 is unclear, many commentators agree that the Kumbh Mela is among the largest ever religious pilgrimages and one of the largest recorded human gatherings. The Kumbh Mela is also an important site for political mobilization: Baral et al., 2025 leverage the variation in Kumbh locations due to the lunar calendar to show that exposure to the Kumbh measurably increases Hindu religiosity, Hindu-Muslim conflict, and the electoral success of the Hindu nationalist BJP.

The survey contained two modules. The first module contained the conjoint experiment. In this module, respondents completed a short battery of basic demographic questions and

were then provided with hypothetical guru profiles and asked to choose which profile they preferred across several dimensions. Conjoint experiments are well-suited to the study of choice over religious leaders as they allow for estimating the Average Marginal Component Effect (AMCE) of multiple experimentally-varied attributes of religious leader profiles at once (Hainmueller et al., 2014). A total of 1,040 respondents completed the conjoint experiment module, and each respondent engaged in two choice tasks. The second module involved an in-depth survey on experiences with religious leaders as well as attitudes toward and opinions of religious leaders and politics more generally. This long module was administered to 497 randomly selected participants in the survey. Of this 497, 178 respondents were active followers of a guru and answered a large set of questions about their experiences with their own guru.

To generate a random sample of pilgrims at the Kumbh Mela, we first created a GIS map of the Mela area. We then assigned enumerators to random points on the map, from where surveying began for a given day. Surveyors were also provided a random direction to walk in and were instructed to approach every 10th person who was in the area and not actively walking to another area. Survey enumerators worked in public areas such as streets and open squares.

Importantly, since we conduct the survey at a religious pilgrimage, we expect this sample to be more religious than a random sample from the entire population of India. We believe this is appropriate for the purpose of our study, as religious Hindus are the group most likely to follow gurus. By studying likely followers, we restrict attention to those individuals for whom gurus are relevant and to whom gurus are most likely to appeal. To compare my findings to nationally-representative findings, I draw on a nationally-representative survey on religion and politics conducted by Pew Research Institute in 2024, which surveyed 29,999 randomly-sampled respondents across India in-person, especially valuable since online surveys in India skew notably toward wealthier urban respondents. Improtantly, survey work at pilgrimage sites also has the benefit of

enabling researchers to reach hard-to-reach samples (Christia et al., 2022) at relatively low cost. In the absence of a nationally-representative sample, the Kumbh Mela allows for reaching a geographically diverse set of Indians much more so than a localized in-person survey would. Table 1 displays descriptive statistics for our sample.

Table 1: Summary statistics

	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Gender (Male = 1)	.7336538	.44226	0	1
Age (years)	36.37404	12.7052	18	81
Education (years)	10.44519	4.701778	0	18
Basic English literacy = 1	.35	.4771991	0	1
Subjective SES	3.580769	2.040781	1	10
Urban = 1	.575	.4945808	0	1
Scheduled Caste = 1	.1596154	.3664252	0	1
Other Backward Class = 1	.4913462	.5001656	0	1

One common criticism of conjoint experiments, and survey experiments in general, is that they may not reflect real-world decision making and the context that shapes decisions. To address this, I follow the lead of Auerbach and Thachil (2022) and ground the conjoint experiment features in a combination of theoretical priors and ethnographic insight from qualitative work with religious leaders and followers. For one week prior to the survey fielding, I conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with religious followers and religious leaders at the Kumbh Mela about what drives followers' choices, and I also observed interaction between followers, leaders, and seekers at the Mela. While many respondents highlighted the importance of immeasurable spiritual connections and divine links between followers and leaders, this exercise revealed a set of important dimensions and also clarified how certain attributes of leaders are communicated to followers and the public writ large. I draw on these insights in my discussion of the survey attributes below.

Asceticism

During my fieldwork, I found that one of the core ways gurus communicated asceticism was by refusing to live in lavish dwellings and instead staying in thatched huts. In one instance, I encountered a guru who was living in a makeshift thatched hut even though his followers were staying in much nicer tents nearby. His followers were keen to point this out to me as a sign of their guru's renunciation and commitment to an ascetic life. In another instance, a guru who had a large and comfortable house not far from the pilgrimage center had set up a simple thatched hut specifically to take meetings and host media figures, illustrating the importance of simple dwellings in communicating renunciation and spiritual authority. Beyond lifestyle, asceticism can also be communicated through the renunciation of marriage. In several qualitative interviews, respondents mentioned that gurus who were unmarried were more trustworthy and less likely to be corrupt, particularly because they did not face the same pressures to support a family. I thus capture asceticism through two conjoint features: whether the guru lives in a large house or a small one, and whether the guru is married or single.

Emphasis and activities

Gurus also vary in the kinds of spiritual activities they promote and in their communication style. Some gurus are very online, having built substantial digital followings and actively seeking to reach their adherents through social media platforms. Gurus also differ in the spiritual activities they emphasize. Many give sermons to groups of followers and organize *kathas*, or recitations of songs that convey important stories from Hindu mythology and are often interspersed with moral lessons. Another set of activities involves yoga and meditation, including formal instruction and guided sessions. While these activities are not mutually exclusive, gurus often specialize in one set and develop a reputation for expertise in that area. To measure differences in gurus' preferred activities, I employ two conjoint features. The first varies whether the guru maintains a strong online presence on social media or

prefers to abstain from it. The second varies whether the guru primarily focuses on yoga or on sermons and spiritual recitations (*kathas*).

Co-ethnicity

I also consider whether gurus are perceived as having a diverse or a mono-ethnic set of followers, defined here in terms of caste identity. During my fieldwork, many gurus refused to discuss their own caste background, and some strongly insisted that becoming a guru entails leaving caste identity behind altogether. At the same time, other gurus are openly associated with a specific caste, particularly in South India, where gurus and religious institutions are often caste-specific (Ikegame, 2010). Gurus' followings are not always diverse: even where they are not formally segmented along caste lines, gurus' popularity often diffuses within specific class contexts, and a guru with mostly upper-middle-class followers will, if only by correlation, also have a primarily upper-caste following. To capture the breadth or specificity of gurus' caste-based appeal, I experimentally vary whether the hypothetical guru has followers from many castes or primarily from the respondent's own caste.

Social service provision

Many gurus provide social services, captured in the Hindu context by the concept of *seva*. In some cases, gurus and their organizations are among the largest providers of education and health services in their states. Yet not all gurus take on this role, with some preferring to focus on religious outreach and teaching rather than service delivery. Many, for instance, concentrate on distributing religious texts such as the *Bhagavad Gita* or other books of prayers and reflections. To capture the extent of the hypothetical guru's social service provision, I vary whether they are primarily known for distributing religious texts or for running schools.

Political involvement

Finally, I measure political involvement along two dimensions. First, I measure *political connectedness*, or visible linkages between gurus and politicians. Political connectedness is not always partisan in nature: many gurus meet with politicians who come to visit them, even when they subtly signal that they favor one side over another. I thus vary whether the hypothetical guru meets many politicians or does not. Second, I measure *political influence*, or whether the guru seeks to shape political outcomes. Gurus rarely overtly endorse candidates, often preferring to exercise discretion and signal support through subtle hints or through guidance diffused by other operatives within their organization. I thus measure political influence by varying whether the guru's *followers* strategically coordinate their votes or not."

7 Findings

Descriptive findings: characterizing the "Guru ka Bazaar"

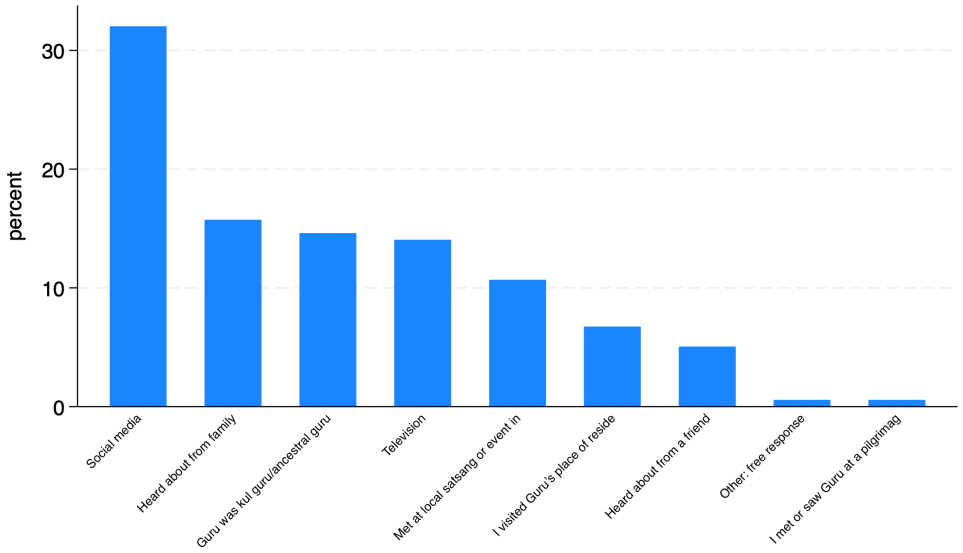
Here, I provide descriptive findings on how religious leadership works in Hinduism from the survey of religious Hindus conducted at the 2025 Kumbh Mela, which I supplement with data from the 2024 Pew survey on religion and politics in India. These sources provide some of the first quantitative descriptive data available on Hindu religious leaders, providing evidence on the functioning of the religious marketplace in the world's third-largest religious tradition.

Across both surveys, similar shares of Hindu respondents report that they follow a guru: 42% of respondents in the nationally-representative Pew survey and 40% of respondents in my own survey. In the Kumbh Mela survey, I further ask respondents whether they have taken *Guru diksha*, or formal initiation as a follower of a guru, signifying a closer, more personal guru-shishya relationship. 13% of respondents, about a third of those who report

following a guru, report having taken formal initiation.

How do people find gurus? Figure 3 below reports the ways that followers first established contact with their gurus. Media, and especially social media, plays an important role in connecting gurus to disciples, with over a third of those who follow a guru reporting that they first heard of them through social media. Family connections are also a notably important source of connection, with roughly a third of respondents reporting that they heard about their guru first from family members or because the guru had long been attached to the family. In the Kumbh Mela survey, followers of gurus reported how often they spend time

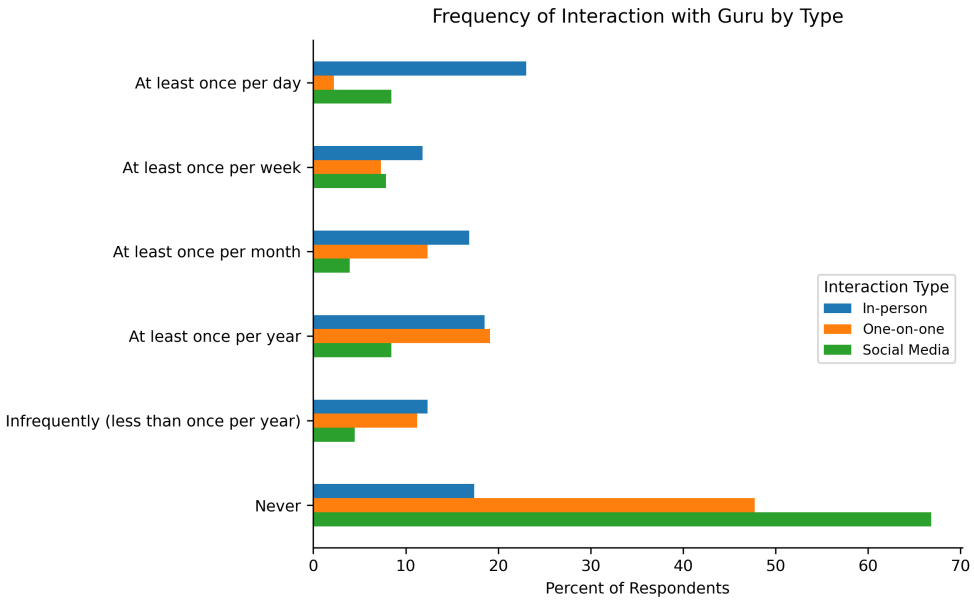
Figure 2: **How followers meet religious leaders**



with their guru, both in in-person and online settings. Overall, I find that engagement is highly varied. A share of respondents report meeting their guru with great frequency. A relatively large share of respondents reports that they never meet one-on-one with their guru, and a large share of respondents report that they do not interact with their guru at all on social media. For in-person, group interaction in settings like services or community sermons, interaction varies significantly in terms of frequency. These findings highlight the varied nature of guru-disciple interactions, which can range from largely informal relationships to highly intensive, personalized relationships consisting of regular meetings. Notably, only

24% of respondents reported living in the same district[4] as their guru, while approximately half of respondents reported following a guru who lives in a different state, underlying the fact that gurus can reach followers over a wide geographic area.

Figure 3: **Frequency and type of reported interaction with gurus**

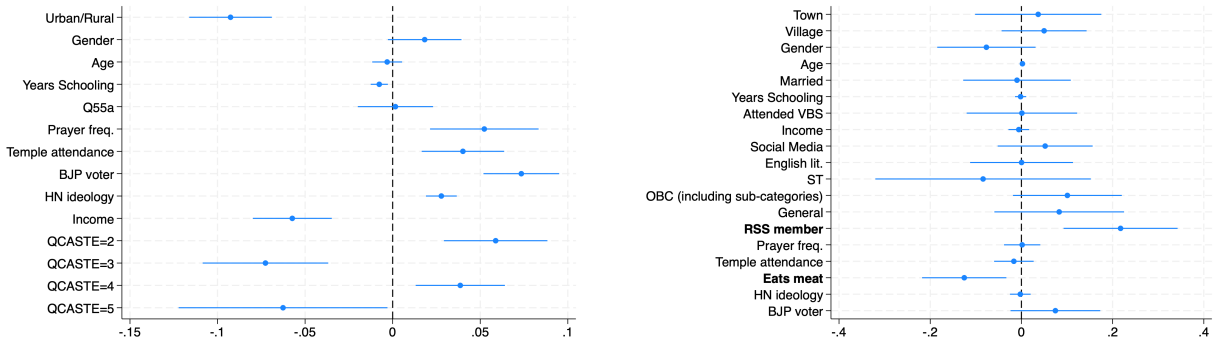


Among the population of Hindus, who is most likely to become a follower? Below, I show the correlates of following a religious leader in both the Pew and Kumbh Mela surveys. Overall, I find that among the sample of respondents in the Kumbh Mela survey, followers and non-followers are broadly similar. I find that members of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)–India's premier Hindu nationalist civil society organization that is the parent organization of the BJP–are more likely to follow gurus. In addition, those who practice vegetarianism–a practice associated with orthodox, and especially upper-caste Hinduism–are more likely to report being followers.

Finally, an important aspect of guru's work is not only their spiritual authority and guidance, but also their assistance with more mundane, earthly matters. To capture the extent of Guru's involvement in more earthly affairs, I asked respondents whether they have ever relied on their guru for assistance with non-religious matters: 45% of respondents

[4]In India, a district is a geographic unit akin to a county in the United States.

Figure 4: **Correlates of follower status**

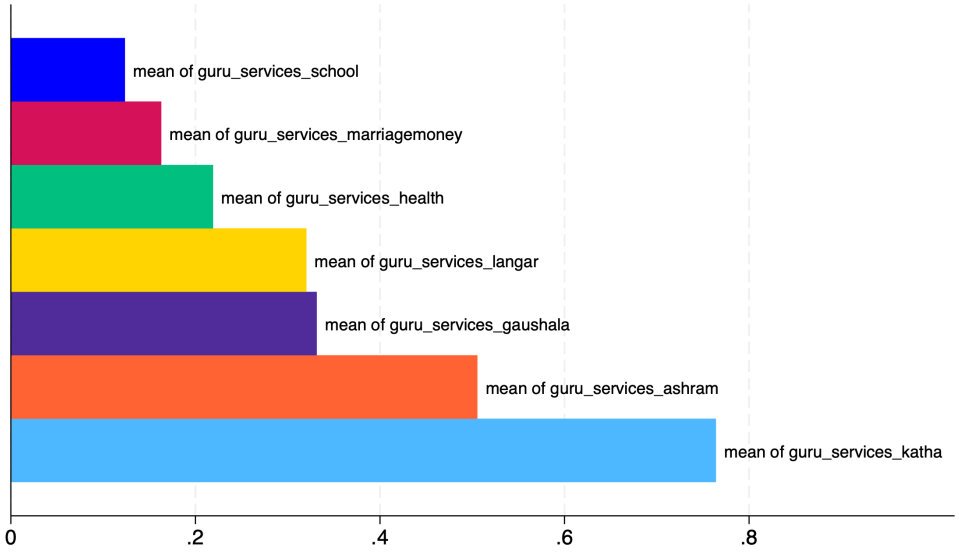


who follow a religious leader reported that they have. I then asked followers about the kinds of services their guru provides, including a mixture of both spiritual and mundane services. Figure 5 below presents the breakdown of reported activities. Most gurus engage in kathas, a common type of religious service that combines reading from religious text, songs, and sermons. Langar (providing free food for devotees) and gaushalas (homes to provide for cows, considered sacred by most Hindus) are relatively common activities reported by roughly a third of respondents. Less common, but still significant, is the provision of healthcare, education, and financial assistance (particularly for help with funding weddings and/or dowries).

Descriptive findings: gurus and politics

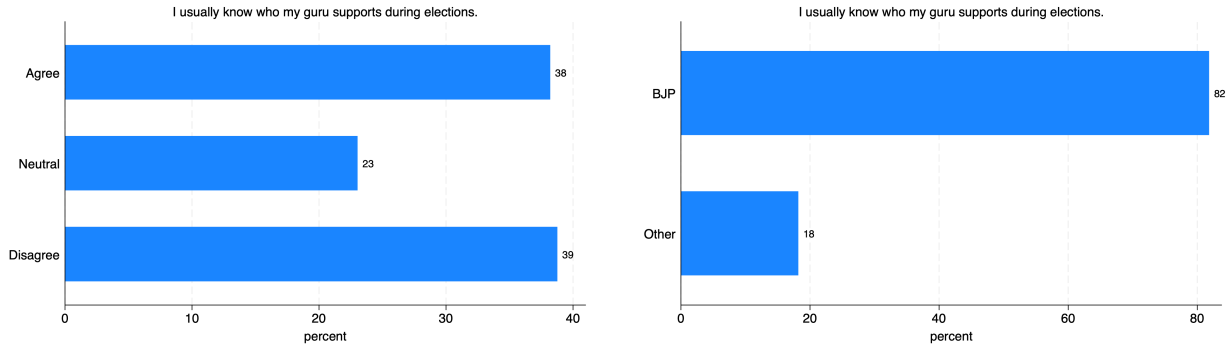
The Kumbh Mela survey also asked religious followers several questions about their guru's involvement in politics. First, I asked respondents whether they had ever seen their guru meet a politician. 30% of respondents stated that they had. In addition, I asked respondents who reported following a guru whether they believed they knew who the guru supported during elections. Since this response could be subject to social desirability bias insofar as there is a norm against openly discussing political involvement by religious leaders (something I strongly suspect is the case based on observing how respondents approached questions on guru's political involvement during my fieldwork), I provided a neutral answer option for

Figure 5: **Frequency and type of reported interaction with gurus**



respondents who wished to neither confirm nor deny this knowledge or who were uncertain. 38% of respondents reported knowing who their guru supports, while 39% said they did not. The remaining respondents provided a neutral response or refused to answer. I then asked those respondents who claimed to know who their guru supported which party the guru supported. To this question, 82% of respondents who agreed to answer the question stated that their guru supported the BJP, while 18% mentioned another party.

Figure 6: **Correlates of follower status**



In addition to asking about partisan involvement, I also asked respondents about their guru's involvement in the *Sangh Parivar*, a network of Hindu nationalist right-wing civil

society organizations of which the BJP is a part: 29% of followers reported that their guru was involved, 43% reported that their guru was not involved, and 28% of respondents were unsure.

Together, these findings suggest that some religious leaders, if not all, are politically involved and seen to be so by their followers. In addition, among many gurus, political involvement seems to primarily involve alliance with the BJP, India's dominant Hindu nationalist party.

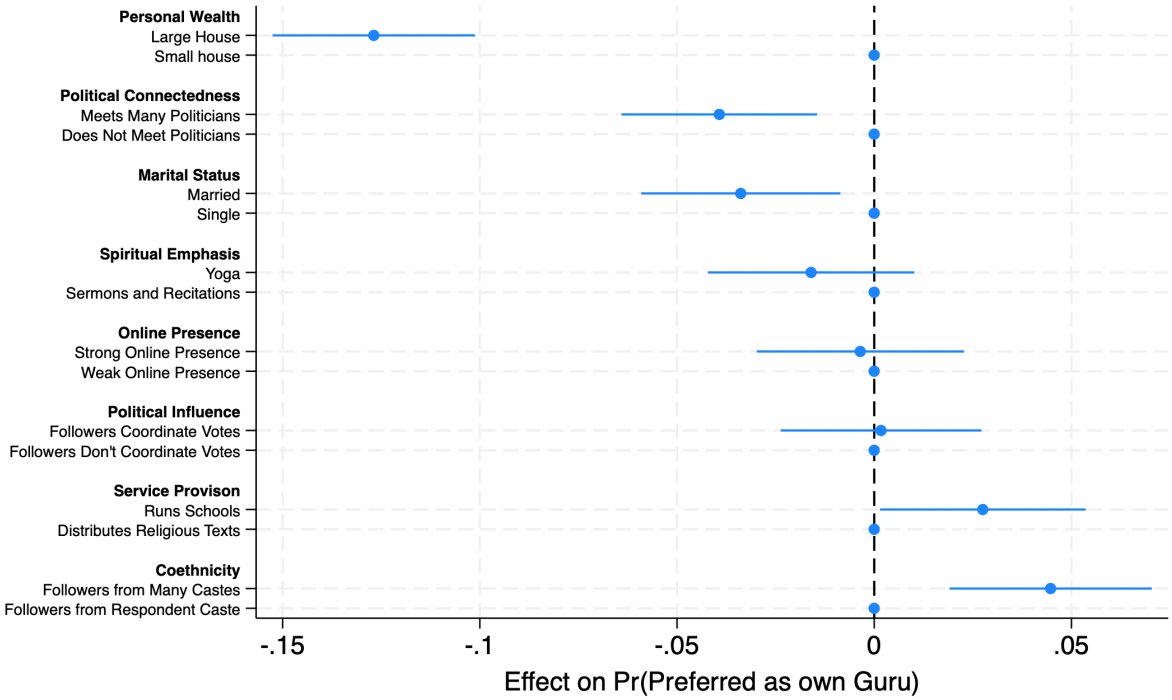
Experimental findings: drivers of religious demand

In this section, I present results from the conjoint experiment on the drivers of demand for gurus. In a competitive religious marketplace, such as Protestant Christianity or Hinduism, gurus would be expected to differentiate themselves in order to capture a corner of the market for religious leadership, appealing to specific and divergent preferences within the population of potential followers. Nonetheless, followers may share certain common criteria for religious leaders that cut across this variation. The conjoint experiment thus serves as a useful tool for identifying the systematic drivers of demand for religious leaders that operate beneath the more idiosyncratic preferences of individual followers.

I find strong evidence that followers systematically prefer their leaders to display asceticism. By far the strongest determinant of choice was the type of house in which the guru lived: gurus depicted as residing in large homes were 10 to 15 percentage points less likely to be chosen, on average, than those depicted as living in small, simple homes. I also find a significant effect of marital status, which proxies for the renunciation of worldly ties, with respondents more likely to prefer unmarried leaders to married ones.

Turning to spiritual emphasis and approach, I find no systematic effect of either spiritual emphasis or online presence on followers' preferences. This is perhaps unsurprising. Hinduism accommodates a wide variety of spiritual emphases: in the Bhagavad Gita, perhaps the most widely read Hindu religious text today, the deity Krishna

Figure 7: **Primary results: Guru conjoint experiment**



outlines several *yogas*, or pathways to the divine, including the path of knowledge (jnana yoga), the path of renunciation and ascetic discipline (raja yoga), the path of righteous action (karma yoga), and the path of devotional practice (bhakti yoga). Although gurus actively differentiate themselves both in terms of spiritual emphasis and in how they reach followers, respondents express no systematic preference for one approach over another.

Service provision stands out as another important driver of guru choice. Respondents were significantly more likely to prefer gurus whose primary activity was running schools to those whose primary activity was distributing religious texts, suggesting that material contributions to follower welfare carry substantial weight in shaping demand.

Notably, I also find evidence that respondents value gurus who attract a diverse array of followers drawn from many castes, rather than gurus whose following is composed primarily of members of their own caste. This is a striking result given the centrality and persistence of caste in Indian society. It nonetheless captures a pervasive feature of gurus that I noted

in my qualitative work: whereas priests have historically been closely tied to the Brahmin caste, gurus often (if not always) cultivate a self-presentation as figures who stand above" or transcend" caste distinctions. Some go so far as to refuse to discuss their own caste background, viewing such matters as overly grounded in worldly affairs and unbefitting a spiritual leader. I return to the significance of this finding in the discussion section below.

Turning to political involvement, I find mixed results that vary with the type of involvement in question. Respondents show a systematic preference against high levels of visible political connectedness, as measured by a statement indicating that the guru meets with many politicians. At the same time, respondents are largely indifferent to whether a guru's followers coordinate their votes, even though such coordination is one of the central mechanisms through which gurus exert political influence in practice. These diverging results offer a more nuanced picture of how different forms of political action by religious leaders are perceived by followers, and they suggest that what followers object to is not political influence as such, but rather its overt and visible expression.

Asceticism, service provision, and political involvement

Why gurus seek out political connections: qualitative evidence

Why might gurus seek out political connections? Interviews with employees of gurus' organizations help shed light on their motivations. One theme that emerged consistently from my qualitative work among religious leaders is the importance of political connections to effective service provision. As one employee of a religious organization who reported directly to a guru explained, "Politicians control everything. If we want to run a school, the state regulates how many students we can recruit. To get permission for more seats, we need favorable regulation, which often means paying a large bribe. With political connections, running schools becomes much easier."[5] Another employee framed the relationship in even more explicit terms: "We see the mission of our organization as

[5]Interview with employee of religious organization, February 2026.

working through the state to provide services to our followers."[6]

Religious leaders, then, often seek out political connections for help navigating the state in the course of social service provision. Political leaders, in turn, view the support of religious figures as a valuable electoral resource, given gurus' broad social reach and their capacity to influence the voting decisions of large numbers of followers. The result is a mutually beneficial exchange in which political connections become a precondition for effective service provision, while religious networks become a vehicle for political mobilization.

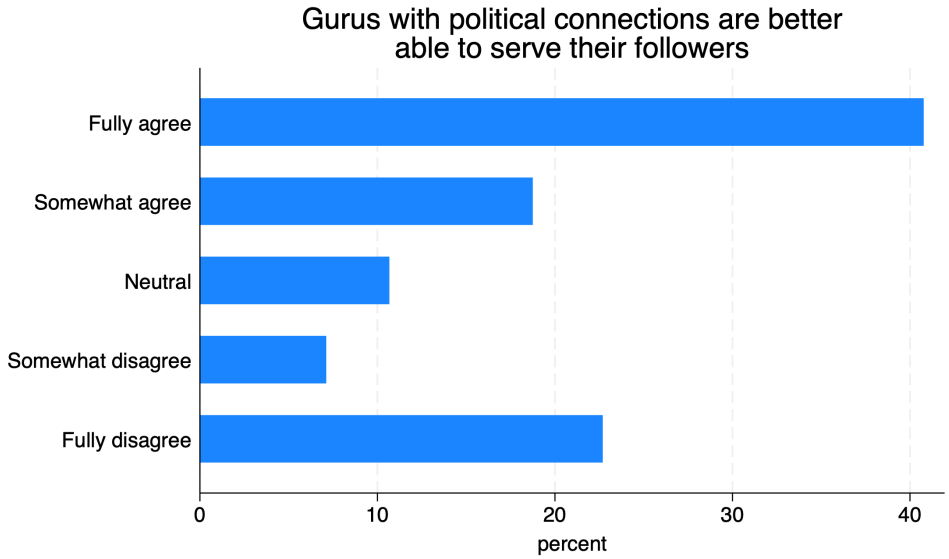
Service provision, asceticism, and attitudes toward gurus' political involvement

As part of the Kumbh Mela survey, I collected data on respondents' perceptions of religious leaders' involvement in politics, seeking to understand how devotees view the intersection of spiritual authority and political influence. Figure 8 illustrates that respondents largely agree that gurus with political connections are better positioned to serve their followers, with roughly half of all respondents either agreeing or somewhat agreeing with this statement. This finding suggests that, rather than viewing political entanglement as a compromise of religious authority, many devotees perceive such connections as a practical asset that enhances a guru's capacity to advocate for and benefit their community.

Figure 9 presents respondents' answers to two questions concerning gurus running for office, a relatively extreme form of political involvement that moves beyond informal influence into the realm of direct electoral participation. Overall, respondents largely disagree with the notion that gurus should run for office in order to enrich themselves, reflecting a clear normative expectation that religious leaders remain detached from personal material gain. However, respondents are considerably more likely to endorse gurus running for office when this involvement is framed as a means of 'serving the people.' This contrast highlights the importance of framing political engagement as 'seva,' or selfless service, and suggests that devotees evaluate the legitimacy of a guru's political activity less by the act itself than by

[6]Interview with employee of religious organization, February 2026.

Figure 8: **Attitudes toward Guru's involvement in politics**



the moral purpose understood to lie behind it.

Figure 10 disaggregates the results from Figure 8 along several dimensions through a series of t-tests, comparing those who follow gurus against those who do not, those who rely on a guru for services against those who do not, those who have personally witnessed their guru meeting with a politician against those who have not, and BJP voters against non-BJP voters. Two patterns stand out. First, neither follower status nor BJP voting behavior produces a meaningful difference in attitudes, suggesting that broad religious or partisan identification is not what drives support for politically connected gurus. Second, respondents who have seen their guru meet with a politician and, to an even greater extent, those who rely on their guru for material services are substantially more likely to agree that political connections enhance a guru's ability to serve their followers. This pattern illustrates the close link between service provision and devotees' preferences regarding gurus' political involvement, suggesting that support for politically engaged religious leaders is rooted less in abstract religious identity than in direct, tangible experiences of what such connections can deliver.

In Figure 11, I apply the same series of t-tests to the results from Figure 9, examining

Figure 9: **Attitudes toward Gurus running for office**

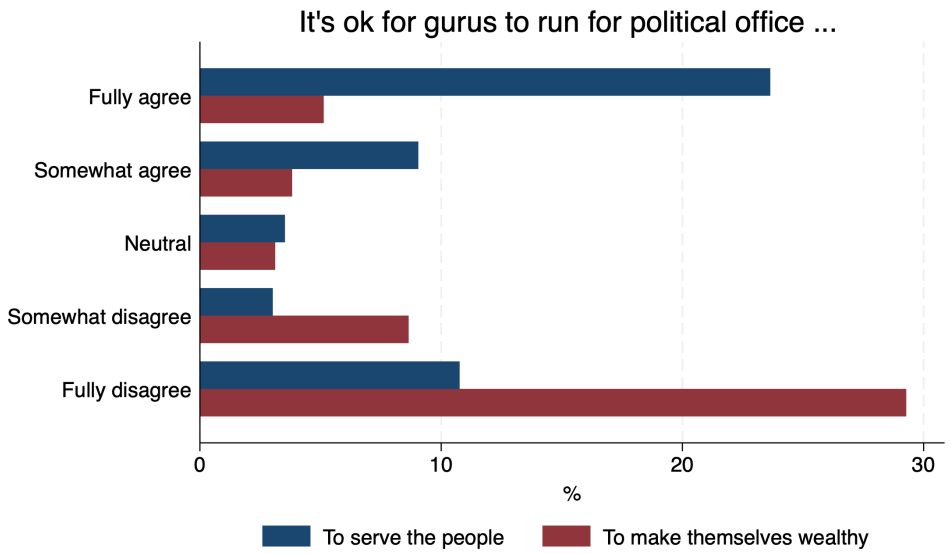
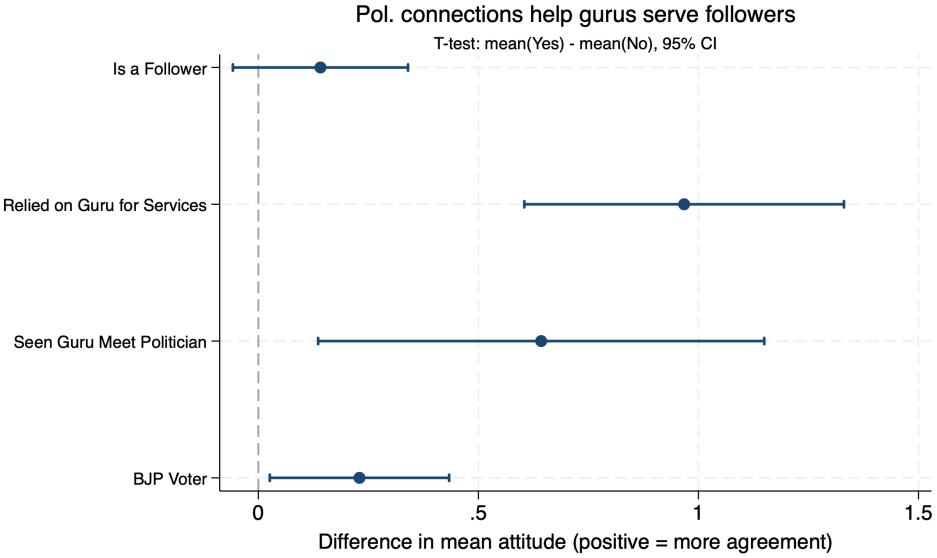
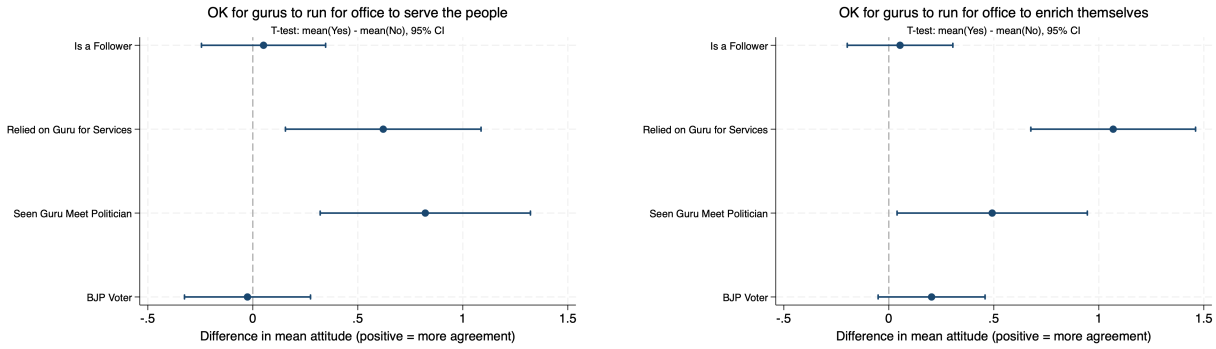


Figure 10: **Attitudes toward gurus' involvement in politics by reliance on guru for service provision**



whether attitudes toward gurus running for office vary across the same set of subgroups. The pattern that emerges closely mirrors the findings from Figure 10: respondents who rely on a guru for services, as well as those who have personally witnessed their guru meeting with politicians, are more likely to endorse gurus running for office themselves. This consistency across both measures of political involvement reinforces the broader interpretation that direct, experiential ties to a guru, particularly those involving material service provision or visible political access, shape devotees' openness to religious leaders taking on explicitly political roles.

Figure 11: **Attitudes toward gurus running for office by beneficiary status**



8 Discussion and conclusion

(This section is to be developed further)

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