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Digital Hindu Influencers and Contemporary Spiritual Discourse

Aiswarya S. Nair
Institute of English
University of Kerala
Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India
aiswaryaanair15@gmail.com

Abstract— With the proliferation of cheap internet, smartphones, and government-funded digital initiatives, social media platforms have emerged as powerful areas for disseminating ideological as well as religious content. Hindu spiritual leaders, like Sadhguru, Devdutt Pattanaik, and Gaur Gopal Das, have capitalized on these platforms to propagate the Hindu philosophy in a renewed form, which intertwines self-help narratives and spiritual discourse. These "Hindu" influencers claim to democratize spiritual knowledge and offer accessible wisdom, but their digital presence simultaneously raises critical concerns regarding the commercialization of faith, algorithmic amplification of ideology, and the erasure of caste, gender, and class inequalities. This paper examines how these digital religious figures utilize social media to cultivate charismatic authority, build unidirectional relationships, and monetize spiritual content. It debriefs the implications of such trends for pluralism, religious identity, and public discourse in India. Furthermore, the study draws parallels with digital influencers in Christianity and Islam to locate Hindu digital spirituality within a global paradigm of online religious transformation. The paper also examines how digital Hinduism marginalizes embodied and erotic ways of knowing, especially those rooted in Bhakti and female devotion, in favour of sanitized spiritual performances.

Keywords- Digital Hinduism, Religious Influencers, Spiritual Branding

I. INTRODUCTION

The digital revolution has drastically altered how religion is communicated, consumed, and contested with the people. For Hinduism, this shift is pronounced and stands out in particular. Traditionally, the spiritual discourse or the spiritual teachings were shared through temple rituals, social or personal interactions with *gurus*, or even through oral storytelling. However, today that dynamics has shifted towards digital spaces and social media platforms [1]. Spiritual messages are carried to the millions through Instagram reels, YouTube shorts, long video formats, and twitter [2], [3], [4]. This kind of access was unimaginable a few decades ago. However, it raises certain pressing questions about authenticity and authority. What does it mean for religious authority when anyone can preach online? How does ideology play out when algorithms decide what content goes viral? These are some of the tensions that define religion's digital turn.

Historically, Hinduism has long shown adaptive resilience to changing modes of communication. Its traditions have moved from oral storytelling and epic poetry to printed forms that played a role in anti-colonial movements, and later to televised renditions of the Ramayana and Mahabharata that captivated audiences across India. However, what distinguishes the digital era apart is not just the medium itself but the pace, scale, and interactive nature of the content circulation. And unlike the earlier technologies, the digital algorithms are not mere medium of propagation, but they are the ones shaping the content circulation. They promote the materials that drive clicks, likes and shares. They tend to favour emotionally charged content over theological nuance. This study centres on three prominent voices in the digital landscape of contemporary Hindu spirituality: Sadhguru (Jaggi Vasudev), Devdutt Pattanaik, and Gaur Gopal Das [5]. Though their styles and areas of focus differ, they are united by a common strategy of leveraging digital platforms to expand their reach and cultivate influence among a largely urban, middle-class audience. Their messaging blends

elements of ancient Hindu texts with the language of self-improvement and the values of modern consumer culture. In doing so, they appeal to individuals who are often seeking comfort and clarity in the face of modern-day struggles such as emotional burnout, social disconnection, and personal uncertainty.

This paper explores the way in which these digital Hindu influencers shape their public authority, develop accessible spiritual narratives, and contribute to emerging forms of cultural nationalism and collective identity. It also tries to consider how the commodification of spiritual discourse may dilute its depth and nuances and could silence the perspectives that challenge the dominant norms, leading to an erasure of the voices of marginalised communities. Drawing from interdisciplinary perspectives in media studies, religious studies, and cultural theory, the study positions these trends within a global landscape where religious influence is being increasingly mediated through individual personalities rather than institutional structures.

II. Related Works

The rise of digital Hindu influencers has significantly transformed contemporary spiritual discourse, intertwining traditional Hindu spirituality with modern digital and capitalistic frameworks. This transformation is characterized by the adaptation of spiritual teachings to digital platforms, where influencers like Sadhguru and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar leverage digital media to expand their reach and influence. These influencers employ strategies that blend spiritual teachings with market-driven practices, creating a new form of spiritual engagement that is both accessible and commercially viable. This digital mediation of spirituality raises questions about the authenticity and depth of spiritual practices in the digital age.

Sadhguru and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar exemplify the Digital Hindu Spirit of Capitalism (DHSC), where spiritual teachings are intertwined with global capitalism and digital technologies. These influencers use digital platforms to mediate their teachings, aligning them with capitalistic practices such as market expansion and techno-solutionism, which are justified through adaptive discourses and hybrid logics [6]. Sadhguru integrates various logics, including market and fame, to frame commercial aspects as intrinsic to his mission, while Sri Sri Ravi Shankar emphasizes network capacity and scale [6].

Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube have transformed the dissemination of spiritual teachings, enabling spiritual leaders to reach a global audience and create interactive communities [7]. This digital mediation commodifies religious experiences, giving rise to "spiritual branding" that merges traditional teachings with contemporary consumer culture. Indian spiritual leaders use social media to promote their teachings and associated products, positioning spiritual content as a consumable product and a vehicle for socio-cultural influence [7]. The digital era presents challenges in maintaining theological depth amid the demands of digital media engagement, as seen in the decentralization of religious authority and the rise of new knowledge centers outside formal structures [8]. Digital storytelling, such as the dissemination of the Bhagavad Gita through short videos, preserves the philosophical core of sacred texts while adapting them to modern attention spans, making them relevant for contemporary audiences [3], [9].

While digital Hindu influencers have successfully expanded the reach of spiritual teachings, there is a concern that the commodification and superficial engagement with spirituality may dilute its transformative potential. The digital mediation of spirituality often prioritizes market-driven practices and emotional immediacy over deeper symbolic and ethical content, potentially leading to a form of spiritual engagement that aligns more with consumer culture than with traditional spiritual values. This raises important questions about the future of spirituality in the digital age and the balance between accessibility and authenticity in spiritual discourse.

III. Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative digital discourse analysis supported by netnography and a comparative case study. The research analyzes selected digital content produced by Sadhguru, Devdutt Pattanaik, and Gaur Gopal Das across social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and X/Twitter [5]. The data are examined through thematic and critical discourse analysis to identify how digital Hindu influencers construct spiritual authority, develop personal brands, monetize religious knowledge, and negotiate issues of caste, gender, class, nationalism, and public religious identity [7]. A comparative perspective is also used to situate Hindu digital spirituality within broader global patterns of online religious influence in Christianity and Islam [10], [11].

IV. Result and Discussion

A. Algorithmic Curation and the Digital Shaping of Hindu Narratives

In the contemporary digital environment, the social media algorithms play an influential and yet unseen role in shaping not only user engagement but also how knowledge, belief, and identity are formed. Built to keep the users scrolling and interacting and for monetization, these algorithms tend to highlight content that often provokes strong emotional reactions. The result is a system where visibility is determined by the ability of content to go viral and not by theological richness or intellectual depth. This shift has had a significant effect on the ways many ideas are shared and understood.

Content about Hinduism tends to stand out on social media, especially when it connects spiritual themes with national pride or cultural uniqueness. These kinds of posts often spread faster and reach more people, not because they offer deep insight, but because they trigger a strong emotional response [12], [13]. A report from the Asia Pacific

Foundation points out that when spiritual messages carry subtle ideological tones, they often gain more visibility online (Asia Pacific Foundation 219). This calls into question the idea that social media naturally supports a wide range of spiritual perspectives [14]. In reality, it often does the opposite. The content people see is filtered and shaped by the platform's own priorities, which means some voices, especially those that challenge dominant views, end up pushed aside or barely seen at all.

This growing entanglement between spiritual messaging and algorithm brings to light deeper questions about the direction in which digital Hinduism is heading. As more content is shaped to suit platform dynamics, the space for critical inquiry begins to shrink. Discussions around social issues such as caste-based discrimination, gender imbalances, or systemic injustice are frequently drowned out by feel-good content like motivational quotes or simplified life advice. These formats are easy to share and emotionally engaging, which contributes to making a streamlined version of Hindu spirituality that is polished, palatable, and carefully curated for mainstream attraction. Over time, this version may seem less about provoking thought and more about feeding consumption.

Figures like Sadhguru, Devdutt Pattanaik, and Gaur Gopal Das have found considerable success within these algorithm-driven spaces. Once a user shows interest in their material by watching a video or liking a post, or clicking through a link, the recommendation engines of platforms like YouTube and Instagram continue to feed similar content, effectively curating a tailored stream of content. Such ecosystems reinforce pre-existing worldviews and reduce exposure to dissenting or alternative theological interpretations, creating a digital echo chamber. As Vince Carducci points out, these "bespoke realities" are shaped less by open inquiry and more by algorithms designed to serve user preferences and keep engagement high [15].

B. Branding the Digital Guru: Influencer Personas and Audience Engagement

Hindu digital influencers have adapted themselves to the pace of online platforms. They are consciously shaping their reputation, brand, appearance, impression, and perception to appeal to a diverse as well as fast-scrolling audience. Sadhguru, for example, has forged an identity that combines traditional yogic wisdom with modern self-help messages [16]. His social media presence is carefully curated with crisp visuals and sharp advice. Whether he is speaking about inner engineering or appearing on international talk shows, he comes across not just as a spiritual guide, but as someone fluent in the aesthetics and tempo of digital media. His "Save Soil" campaign, promoted through a high-profile motorcycle journey across continents, is a clear case of how spiritual leadership today is packaged for visibility and virality.

Gaur Gopal Das approaches things a little differently but no less strategically [3]. He merges humour with introspective storytelling, often using short, digestible videos to talk about suffering, trauma, relationships, or purpose. His background in engineering and his affiliation with ISKCON act as a credible qualification among both spiritual seekers and young professionals. He makes his content stand out by sounding like a thoughtful elder brother or a compassionate mentor. His appeal lies in that mix of simplicity and warmth, and not in speaking from a pedestal.

Devdutt Pattanaik takes on the role of a public thinker who brings in mythology, corporate logic, and cultural commentary [17], [18]. He weaves them into narratives that explain Hindu symbols and stories in a modern light. His background in the corporate world helps him draw parallels that resonate with urban audiences. But his interpretations, especially on caste and gender, have stirred pushback. He's been both celebrated and challenged online, and that tension reflects how digital spiritual discourse isn't always harmonious or uncritical.

Across the board, these figures rely on the tools of the influencer age of bite-sized content, eye-catching design, and direct audience interaction. But more importantly, they each show how spiritual messaging today doesn't just travel through new mediums, but it takes new shapes entirely. What they offer is not only guidance but identity, which is packaged, branded, and delivered in the same formats as lifestyle advice or wellness tips. It is a reminder that in the age of reels and retweets, even the sacred must perform.

C. The Commercialization of Hindu Spirituality Online

There is no denying that spirituality online is now an industry. What may have once been quiet, intimate exchanges between teacher and student have, on digital platforms, been transformed into marketable products. As we have talked earlier Hindu spiritual influencers are not just sharing teachings anymore, they are selling experiences, ideologies, and personal brands.

Sadhguru's "Inner Engineering" is a striking example. On the surface, it is a spiritual course. But in structure and tone, it often resembles the kind of lifestyle coaching that has become popular across wellness communities worldwide. There is a polished website, structured modules, and optional retreats, all with a price tag. For many, this is not a problem. They see it as a way to scale spiritual wisdom and reach people who might never step into an ashram. But others raise an eyebrow. Does putting a price on spiritual growth turn it into a commodity? Can you truly sell inner transformation without altering what it means?

Devdutt Pattanaik, too, has found a niche that blends the sacred and the professional. His storytelling sessions and corporate workshops use mythology to explain leadership, culture, and teamwork. It's creative and unusual, and clearly in demand. Gaur Gopal Das follows a different path, more rooted in Bhakti traditions, but even he has found a global audience through books, interviews, and public talks. His messages, too, are packaged in ways that fit the modern

marketplace along with titles, slogans, and carefully timed drops.

All of this raises tough questions. Is this just the natural evolution of spiritual practice in a digital age? Or is something being lost in the process? As more money flows into these ecosystems, it becomes harder to ignore the imbalance. Most of this content, which includes the courses, the books, the talks etc are designed for people with internet access, education, and disposable income. What happens to the rest? Where do the voices go that challenge the system, rather than fit neatly into it?

This is not to say that commerce and spirituality must always conflict. But the tension is real. When religious content becomes a product, it begins to obey the rules of the market: attention, branding, profit. And in doing so, it risks flattening out complexity in favour of what sells.

But this relationship between commerce and spirituality does not just end with the market logic of selling things like retreats or online courses. The same tools that are used to market spiritual content also decide which content should get popularised. Over time, certain themes—like national pride or cultural revival—start surfacing more often, not just because they reflect spiritual values, but because they work well in the algorithm. And that is where things get complicated. What starts as religious content slowly picks up political meaning. The more spiritual narratives lean into ideas of identity and heritage, the more they begin to sound like something else entirely—something that is not just about personal transformation, but about who belongs, what is ancient, and what should be preserved.

D. Social Media, Ideology, and Religious Identity

Social media has shifted Hinduism from the status of a religion to a national identity. Especially on Instagram and YouTube, many influencers present Hinduism as a civilizational force which is ancient, wise, and uniquely Indian. This framing, along with creating a larger narrative of cultural pride, also taps spiritual discourse in to political terrain. For instance, Sadhguru regularly speaks about India's "spiritual wealth" and its role as the "mother of yogic science." These statements, though framed as historical or cultural reflections, often echo themes found in revivalist or nationalist rhetoric.

While categorizing the entire influencers as pushing political agenda is not right, we are sure that the lines are often blurred. The language of tradition, religion and identity are often blended easily with messages of self-empowerment, especially when wrapped in talk of "ancient wisdom" or "Bharatiya values." But this mix can quietly reinforce ideological positions, especially those aligned with the broader goals of Hindutva or cultural nationalism.

Meanwhile, digital spaces more explicitly tied to right-wing Hindu groups have been even more direct. Pages and channels aligned with Hindutva ideologies use religious content—*bhajans*, quotes from the Gita, temple visuals—to build emotional narratives that support political aims. It is not always inflammatory. Sometimes it is just repetition, familiarity, or pride. But over time, this shapes what people associate with being Hindu: not just prayer or philosophy, but allegiance.

Scholars have begun warning about what is at stake here. The more spiritual identity gets fused with political messaging, the more pluralistic traditions within Hinduism are put at risk. What is forgotten in these loud online spaces is the quieter, humbler versions of Hindu life—the syncretic practices, the local gods, the small rituals, the everyday philosophy that is not built for a viral reel.

This is why critical engagement matters. It's not about rejecting digital Hinduism altogether, but about asking tougher questions: Who is being represented? Who is being excluded? And how much of what we call faith online is actually ideology in disguise?

E. Social Justice and Caste in the Digital Hindu Sphere

For all the talk about how social media opens doors, there's one conversation that digital Hinduism often seems hesitant to fully engage: caste. Often what we see is that while the platforms offer new ways to spread spiritual ideas, they also tend to echo old patterns of silence, especially when it comes to inequality and exclusion.

If we analyse the social media language of the most prominent Hindu influencers, we can see that they lean heavily on the language of oneness and spiritual equality. Posts about "we are all the same soul" or "atman is beyond birth" are repeated often, and while they may sound inclusive on the surface, they can also serve as a quiet deflection. By jumping straight to metaphysical unity, these narratives often skip over the reality of structural discrimination—particularly the deeply embedded hierarchies of caste.

This kind of omission has not gone unnoticed. Dalit writers, scholars, and activists have pointed out that digital Hinduism, in many cases, speaks most clearly to those who already occupy positions of social privilege: urban, upper-caste, English-speaking audiences who see spiritual growth as personal development, not political resistance. The platforms may be open, but the conversation is not always welcoming.

When caste is mentioned, the results are often tense. Devdutt Pattanaik once sparked backlash by comparing social distancing during the pandemic to the historical practice of untouchability. Many found the analogy deeply inappropriate, and it opened a flood of criticism online. His intent may have been metaphorical, but it revealed just how sensitive and how misrepresented these issues can be in mainstream spiritual discourse. Sadhguru, when asked about caste discrimination in one of his videos, responded by saying, "Caste was not meant to be about birth. It was about the type of work you do. Unfortunately, society distorted it. But let's not throw away the whole system just because some people misused it." This idea mostly aligns with the savarna comfort zone of considering caste as a "good idea gone wrong", avoiding the lived reality of caste discrimination,

untouchability, violence against Dalits, or reservation debates. He never critiques the Brahmanical domain, instead focusing on a superficial and revisionist stance.

At the same time, an entirely different movement is growing in parallel. Dalit voices have been carving out their own spaces online to document everyday caste injustice, call out microaggressions, and share narratives that do not fit into the sanitized version of Hinduism [19]. These digital activists are not asking to be included; they are creating their own narrative arcs, grounded in lived experience rather than inherited authority [20], [21]. Pages like "Dalit Camera", Equality Labs, and The Dalit Diva by Thenmozhi Soundararajan are actively documenting caste-based atrocities. They are vocal about how their spiritual practices emerge from subaltern traditions like Ambedkarite Buddhism, Bhakthi poetry, Tamil Siddha traditions, etc.

Sumeet Samos, the rapper from Odisha, uses his lyrics to directly confront Savarna spiritual leaders for ignoring caste, while claiming to talk about "oneness" and "truth." What this tells us is that while the digital world has potential for inclusion, it does not guarantee it. Spirituality alone won't dismantle caste unless it is willing to name it, interrogate it, and challenge the comfort of those who benefit from its invisibility. In his song "Jaati," Odia-born rapper and activist Sumeet Samos directly confronts the hypocrisy he sees in India's public discourse—pointing out how many voices that quickly supported movements like Black Lives Matter remain silent when Dalits face violence. He calls the situation out bluntly, saying, "*Jati jati hi nahi hai*" ("Caste simply hasn't ended"), to stress how caste discrimination continues to shape everyday life in India

What is happening within digital Hinduism isn't unique. Across the world, other religious traditions are also grappling with what it means to practice and preach in an online space [22]. The rise of religious influencers has become a global phenomenon—one that reshapes how authority is earned, how belief is communicated, and who gets to lead. In Christian online religious circles, pastors are no longer limited to pulpits or Sunday sermons. Many of them run YouTube channels, stream live prayer services, or share sermon clips through Instagram reels. During the pandemic times, marriages and even housewarmings were validated through online sermons and prayers. In Islam, similar patterns have also emerged. Young Islamic influencers use TikTok, Twitter, and Instagram to reach fellow Muslims with religious content that feels modern, personal, and relatable. They are a subtle attempt to normalise misogyny by the restrictive interpretation of Islam. There are male influencers who contribute to the Muslim Manosphere by co-opting Islamic terminology and scriptures to justify misogyny. Some offer practical religious guidance—like how to pray or fast—while others focus on motivation, identity, or cultural pride. A study by Zaid et al. observes how this digital shift is creating new models of Islamic authority, ones that often bypass traditional clerics or seminaries entirely, influencing the young Muslims understand their faith [10].

MehdinaTV, a YouTube channel run by a Muslim couple, Mehdi and Mubina, has built a strong following by sharing glimpses into their life [23]. They focus on themes like marriage, modesty, and faith, sanitizing and marketing deeply patriarchal principles. They subtly reinforce traditional gender roles in the name of religion. Videos feature Mubina in a niqab, and she often speaks about how modesty brings peace or comfort, while reinforcing gender segregation, advocating limited female social freedom, and implying women's autonomy must fit within strict gender roles. According to an article, "The Double Standard of Religious Misogyny on Social Media" by Eliana Silver, their videos tend to gloss over the more problematic, patriarchal aspects of conservative Islamic thought and package it in a way that feels entertaining and harmless (The Freethinker). For critics, this blend of aesthetic charm and regressive messaging makes their content especially concerning.

The pattern that links all of these traditions together is not just the use of social media, but the shift in who holds power. It is no longer just about institutions; it is about personalities. Charisma, relatability, and online consistency matter more than traditional credentials. This transformation cuts across borders and beliefs, signalling a broader realignment in how religious authority works in the digital age.

V. CONCLUSION

It is clear that Hindu spirituality has taken on a new shape in the digital world. Figures like Sadhguru, Gaur Gopal Das, and Devdutt Pattanaik have managed to build massive followings online, speaking to people across countries, age groups, and cultural backgrounds. Their reach is impressive, and there is no doubt that their work has made spiritual ideas more accessible than ever. But with that expansion comes a subtle shift, one that often goes unnoticed, yet is important to pay attention to.

The kind of content that travels fastest online is usually short, feel-good, and easy to take in. That is great for visibility, but it does not leave much space for more uncomfortable or complex conversations. Topics like caste discrimination, gender inequality, or how religion is informing day to day politics rarely make it to the forefront. When they are left out, what we are left with is a version of spirituality that looks appealing on the surface, but often lacks the weight it should carry. Here the bigger concern is not technology itself, it is also about what we choose to say through it and what we choose to ignore. When religious content starts to look and sound like any other online product, we need to ask: What are we losing in the process?

Furthermore, the digital presentation of polished, motivational and algorithmically optimised Hinduism risks diluting the religion's rich diversity and its long history of dissent, dialogue, and reform. Traditions like Bhakti, which once gave space to marginalized voices, and philosophies like Advaita, which challenge material hierarchies, are now often reduced to simplified quotes and marketable slogans. The

spiritual influencers dominating these spaces maintains silence on injustice or their selective commentary often aligns with dominant narratives like nationalism, patriarchy and caste blindness. Their claims of being apolitical, while seemingly neutral, may in fact have long-term consequences, subtly shaping public consciousness in ways that depoliticize injustice and hinder the pursuit of a more equitable future.

In light of this, our goal should not be to dismiss digital forms of spirituality altogether, but to approach them with a keen and discerning lens. When we begin to embrace things which are always convenient, comforting, or easily consumable, there is a risk that spiritual engagement becomes more about appearances than substance. In such portrayal's, depth gives way to popularity, and genuine community is reduced to the algorithm of visibility and emotionally charged responses. What we must strive for instead is a digital Hinduism that is ethically grounded, socially conscious, and open to difficult questions. Such a vision would prioritize not only harmony and inspiration, but also be willing to confront injustice, accommodate diverse voices, and foster meaningful reflection.

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