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Gods in the public sphere: political deification in South Asia

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes the idea of 'political deification' as a useful analytical concept to theorize the efficacy of religious icons, symbols, and objects in the political field of social movements and electoral politics in South Asia. This article uses the insight from various ethnographic studies to understand comparatively what political deification does, that is, what it is productive of. Some forms of political deification operate at the scale of the nation and sovereign authority; other forms operate at the scale of more localised caste-based communities within relatively established political orders; while yet other forms are scaled in ways that enable them to partake in countercultural formations that work to bring new political communities into being in opposition to an established order. We argue that political deification is fundamentally productive of political communities at different scales, in different contexts, and different parts of South Asia.

The aim of this thematic issue is to theorize the efficacy of religious icons, symbols, and objects in the political field of social movements and electoral politics in South Asia. Towards this end, we propose the notion of 'political deification' as a useful analytical concept. This concept has been used in the Indian media for several years, but has so far not been interrogated academically. In the study of the interconnectedness of religious and political processes, a lot is lost in the gap between disciplines, such as, political science, history, the study of religion, and political anthropology. This thematic issue aims at exploring this gap between disciplines where, we suspect, the intersection between religion and politics in the phenomenon of political deification is located. In this thematic issue, we therefore ask: What kind of efficacy of gods and their things are mobilized in the interest of community building and vote bank politics? How can we understand the processes through which political leaders, god-men, stars of all kinds, and big or small deities mingle together in the public sphere as 'special beings' (Taves 2012) with their ability to cohere communities of followers? And, how can we theorize the slippages between the divine and the material business of money and power among political authorities, actors, and lay voters?

While these questions are interesting in their own right, they assume a particular urgency and significance at the present conjuncture. In India for example, the road to

and aftermath of the 2019 elections was paved by clear signs of a radical de-secularization in Indian electoral politics (Nilsen, Nielsen and Vaidya 2019), with national and regional parties participating in the one-upmanship game of reclaiming the symbols of Hinduism, in order to compete with the discourse and politics of Hindutva (Hindu Nationalism), as espoused by the incumbent Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) (Sen and Nielsen, 2021). Both Hindutva and its counter-cultures are now squarely placed in the domain of religious symbols, mythological narratives, and deified political figures. Similarly, deified and martyred figures of past conflicts now serve as national icons that cohere the polity as a sovereign figure. This includes, for example, Velupillai Prabhakaran in Sri Lanka (Thiranagama 2022), and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in Bangladesh (Ruud 2022). Importantly, while scholarly work has for long explored the intersection between the religious and the political in South Asia (Freitag 1980; Dickey 1993; Davis 1996; Rajagopal 2001; Pinney 2004; Chatterjee 2004; Kakar 2010; Piliavsky 2014; Sen 2018; Michelutti 2020; Jain 2021), much remains to be theorised on the commonplace use of religious symbols in the political field. For example, how and why do political authorities, caste minorities, women, and activists use religious symbolism in the political field? Indeed, how is the political field and its public institutions negotiated and reconfigured through religious symbolism? Are emerging subaltern or 'reinvented' forms of deification deployed by communities in purely instrumental ways within electoral politics, or are larger processes of subjective transformations at work? While these questions are not new to the study of religion and politics in South Asia, we believe that an approach that foregrounds processes of political deification is capable of providing novel answers. The six individual articles in this issue seek to do this by zooming in on various aspects of political leadership, the charisma of political and religious actors, reinvented cults and deities, and the subversion of heroes and villains in hegemonic myths. Crucially, they do so in contexts of political mobilisation, organisation and competition, where lived religion merges with the political cultures of the different parts of South Asia covered in this issue. The articles combine interdisciplinary theories from anthropology, political science, the study of religion, and history to offer novel insights into the forms and consequences of political deification in South Asia. The main aim of this introduction is to contextualise the individual articles by discussing the role and relevance of political deification in the context of South Asian life worlds. We begin by briefly addressing the relationship between religion and politics.

'Like Oil and Water': On the separation of Religion and Politics.

Timothy Fitzgerald (2011) used the analogy of oil and water for the relationship between religion and politics in popular and academic discourse, particularly in the discipline of international relations. In his words:

> They are like oil and water; or like two chemical elements which, when confined in their proper domains, are safe and harmonious, but when mixed become dangerously unstable. If 'religion' (which is essentially non-political and uninterested in power in this world) mistakenly becomes involved in 'politics' (which is the worldly arena of rational action) then it ceases to be true religion and becomes a dangerous and unnatural hybrid (ibid., 78).

For several decades now, academic debates in many disciplines have pointed to the problems that arise from such an analytical separation of religion and politics, whether cast metaphorically or otherwise. While this has particularly been the case in the study of the

global South, the analytical separation has also been questioned in the study of Europe and the global North. The study of civil religion, for example, has argued for the power of sacred symbols of the nation (Bellah and Hammond 2013), while the study of important secular institutions has demonstrated the religious roots of civic rituals (Moore and Myerhoff 1977). The analytical separation of religion and politics has also been critiqued through studies of a variety of political phenomena within Europe such as the exhumation and reburial of special persons in post-socialist Eastern Europe (Verdery 2013), and the desecration of Communist monuments and statuary in Germany and neighbouring countries (Gamboni 2013), to name but a few examples.

Similarly, the state-church separation or laicism in European political thought has been shown to have theological roots, and to have been formed by a history of religious wars (Asad 2003; Taylor 2007; Roy 2013). Giorgio Agamben (2007) claims that 'the political secularization of theological concepts (the transcendence of God as a paradigm of sovereign power) does nothing but displace the heavenly monarchy onto an earthly monarchy, leaving its power intact' (ibid., 25-26), arguing that the displacement of sacral authority (or *sacrare*) from religious to secular institutions legitimises the authority of the latter. This echoes Carl Schmitt's use of the term 'political theology' in his reading of the role of theology in modern jurisprudence. He writes:

> All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver, but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts.

The scholarship based on the renewed interest in political theology (Yelle 2018; Vatter 2020) forms an important, albeit oftentimes implicit frame of reference for our discussion of political deification. This includes Ernst Kantorowicz's *King's Two Bodies* (1997), even if this analysis of political theory is based primarily on European Christian theology. As has long been demonstrated, in non-western contexts too – including multireligious democratic contexts – the analytical separation of religion and politics is prone to collapse under the weight of lived experience. Even the official 'Indian secularism' of the early post-colonial decades, for example, never followed the doctrine of separation, but rather insisted on the state intervening equally in all forms of religious life to uphold inter-religious tolerance (Bhargava 2002; Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, and Van Antwerpen 2011). Our endeavour in this special issue is therefore not examine the ideological, legal or political work that goes into separating religion and politics at the level of discourse; it is, rather, to work on the terrain of the conceptual where these become inseparable.

The study of the intersection of religion and politics in South Asia shows that different countries deal with majority religions and the rights of minority religious populations, within the framework of governmentality (Rollier, Frøystad, and Ruud 2019; Riaz 2010). An exhaustive bibliography of the many studies in history and anthropology which analyse religion and politics in South Asia in a primary or secondary way is a daunting project (and also beyond the scope of this introduction), precisely because to speak of the political field in a meaningful way takes one into the domain of religious affects and institutions – and vice versa. However, we note that in a good deal of

scholarship of what we may call political behaviour, 'religions', whether Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Sikhism, and so on, continue to be understood largely in a common-sense way[1] as private faith, that is, as unrelated to commercial incentives and the economy – and essentially as a matter of piety and pious people. This despite the significant scholarship from the study of religion that has repeatedly argued otherwise. The articles in this collection work both with and against this common-sense but ultimately counterproductive understanding as they insist on the inseparability of the two.

In this issue, we are inspired by Chantal Mouffe's (2005) distinction between 'the political' and 'politics'. By the political, Mouffe refers to the dimension of antagonism and conflictuality that is constitutive of all human societies, whereas 'politics' denotes more specific sets of practices and institutions that organise human co-existence. In the Indian context, Nikita Sud (2020: 152-153) has recently elaborated on this distinction, arguing that 'politics' in Mouffe's sense of the term must be understood as the fusion of 'everyday politics with a small 'p' … as also Party Politics with a big P'. This fusion that she calls 'P(p)olitics' deploys 'processes of deliberation, negotiation, coercion, incorporation, capitulation, manoeuvring and further conflicts, and possible consensus-building'. We rely on a comparable understanding of politics as we focus on the domain of electoral politics, institutional processes of governmentality, and social movements. However, while the articles in this issue are thus firmly located on the ground of politics (or P(p)olitics) among people and their pursuit of power and authority, they also make important claims about the larger question of the political. For example, while the articles in this issue remain focused on localised and empirically specific case studies, they shed light on the idea of the nation, civil religion, sovereignty, political theology, scriptural authority, and the construction of ethnic or caste-based identities.

What is political deification and why does it matter?

In its generic form, political deification refers to the phenomenon of political leaders being treated like Hindu deities. The term is used regularly in the Indian media, and is a serious theme in Indian politics. It has been the topic of magazine issues, articles, and debates in electronic and print media. Some articles have analysed the phenomenon through short portraits of political leaders and their followers; others have reported on it in more or less detail; while yet others have warned their readers against the 'danger of deification' and its attendant 'culture of political veneration' (*Outlook* 2016), taking on a clear normative tone. Indeed, among the middle classes obvious acts of deification of political leaders are often treated as an oddity, a scandal, or an outright joke at the expense of the state of Indian democracy. This is perhaps most visible on social media forwards and feature pieces in the media. For example, sample Image 1 below from the Instagram page 'Bengalis of Late Capitalism', a satire page that widely made fun of and ridiculed the poster on the image. The poster is a piece of political propaganda put up during *Navaratri,* or Durga *puja*, and suggests that 'the goddess' Mamata Banerjee (the current chief minister of West Bengal) has slayed 'Modi-Shah-Sur'. While this refers to the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Home Minister Amit Shah, it is also a refined

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[1]This common-sense understanding, however, is also based on the abiding postulates of nineteenth century European universalism in the ideology of the study of religion as a discipline according to Tomoko Masuzawa (2005).

Image 1. Screenshot of Instagram page 'Bengalis of Late Capitalism' (25.09.21)

play on words on the Bengali pronunciation of Mahishasur (Mohishashur phonectically), the Hindu demon slayed by the Hindu goddess Durga. In this way, the poster works to deify Mamata Banerjee through the demonization of Modi and Shah and the invocation of Hindu mythology and symbolism (see also Nielsen 2010; 2016; 2018: 165-187; Sen 2018; 2021).

Such forms of political deification are a commonly used mobilisation technique by Banerjee's party the Trinamool Congress (TMC). For example, in 2016, a local festival-organising 'youth club' in Nadia district in West Bengal put up a ten-armed image of Mamata Banerjee (see Image 2) in place of the devotional icon of goddess Durga during Durga puja (for details see Sen 2021).

The following year another local club used the same image, but this time added a layer of political allegory to it: A so-called separatist political leader – and Banerjee's rival in Darjeeling in the northern parts of the state – was shown as the demon, a supplicant Mahishasur offering the map of Darjeeling to the ten-armed minister-goddess (see Image 3).

hen co-author Sen spoke to members of the organising committee, it turned out that the head of the committee was indeed a TMC minister. Both of the above cases were written about in the English-language media as amusing scandals. Yet, as the organisers repeatedly pointed out to Sen, the festival revellers had no problems with this iconography and imagery. As the head of the organising committee put it: 'They understand our deeper message of how the minister is like a goddess who protects us' (see Images 4 and 5).

Image 2. A ten-armed Mamata Banerjee holding a representation of different developmental projects in West Bengal, Prantik Club, 2016. Photograph by co-author Sen.

Image 3. Mamata Banerjee as Durga, her ministers as attendant deities, and Bimal Gurung as Mahishasur handing her the cartographical representation marked 'Darjeeling' in Bengali. Nadia, 2017. Photograph by co-author Sen.

Image 4. People looking at the image of Banerjee and lined up in front of a clay image of Durga in the Prantik Club pandal or temporary temple-like structure, Prantik Club, 2016. Photograph by co-author Sen.

Image 5. A young girl doing namaskar or showing devotion to the image of goddess Durga on the left while another little girl looks at the installation of the minister as the goddess. Both icons are of the same scale and placed in the centre of the pandal or temporary temple-like area, Nadia, 2017. Photograph by co-author Sen.

As indicated above, such deification of political leaders in the arena of popular politics is far from uncommon in contemporary India. In the spring of 2022 when a number of Indian state saw elections, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was described by a minister in the Madhya Pradesh state government as an *avatari purusha,* an avatar or incarnation of God. According to the minister, Modi had been born into this world – like the great Hindu gods Ram and Krishna – to end the atmosphere of despair caused by the corruption and casteism of his predecessors (PTI 2022). In the neighbouring state of Uttar Pradesh, Modi's political rival Akhilesh Yadav also invoked Lord Krishna in his campaign, claiming that the God visited him nightly in his dreams to tell him that he would form the next state government; when that happened, Yadav would ensure Ram Rajya in Uttar Pradesh (Gupta 2022). Whether framed as humour, mocked as a political gimmick, or taken as a sign of sincere devotion, it is our contention that the Indian voter understands the forms, processes and material and symbolic indicators of political deification as a matter of common sense. And certainly, political workers, activists and leaders engage with it as part of their political work, variously embracing it and keeping it somewhat at arm's length depending on the context of political action. In this sense, we see political deification as – at least in part – an emic concept, even if readers may object that it is not a vernacular concept: it is meaningful and operational in discourse and practice among political actors, lay citizens, and traditional and social media commentary across India. And, the material and symbolic forms of expression that cohere around it are recognisable and relatable to most Indians.

While political deification thus refers to the phenomenon of political leaders being treated like Hindu deities, we also include in our working definition of political deification the related but distinct process of established and emerging deities being invoked in political arenas. Icons and symbols related to religious figures are routinely used in political propaganda all over the world, from the global north to the south. Particularly in South Asia, political parties have a long history of wresting political power via a popular (and populist) claim of custodianship of religions. Indeed, the invocation or violation of the honour or rights of gods or religious figures are arguably intricately linked to the rise and fall of political parties. It was, after all, the narrative of the mythic figure of Ram, the hero of the Hindu epic Ramayana, that allowed the BJP to effectively use ideas of India's sacred geography to create a strong popular support base (Manchanda 2002; Anderson and Jaffrelot 2018; Jaffrelot 1993). The leaders of BJP embodied the iconography of Ram by bearing his weapons, in a gesture to awaken the dormant masculinity of Hindu men (Davis 1996). While this is perhaps the best-known case of the overt politicisation of a Hindu deity in the arena of electoral politics, there are countless other instances of effective politicisation of established religious icons in smaller communities, and at the level of grassroots politics. The articles in this special issue, for example, show the politicisation of minor Hindu deities, as well as the use of deities from indigenous and formerly untouchable communities in political mobilisation.

Yet our ambition here is also to lift the concept of political deification to the level of the etic, and use it as a prism for cross-cultural analysis. When we began working on this issue in the summer of 2019, our strategy was therefore to invite our contributors – who first presented their work at an international conference in Calcutta in December 2019 – to reflect on political deification from the standpoint of their own field data and

disciplinary debates. In other words, we did not offer our contributors a rigid and ready-made definition of political deification to work with, but rather invited them to draw on a working definition to reflect on (1) how and to what extent ideas of political deification were resonant in their particular field sites; and (2) what forms of political practice and mobilisation such a concept would bring into focus. Approached in this way, what concerns our contributors to this issue is not so much to map out what political deification *is* or *means* in each of the six different contexts in which they authors have worked (although that too is important), but rather to understand comparatively what political deification *does*, that is, what it is *productive of*. As we elaborate below, the main argument that runs through this collection of articles is that political deification is fundamentally productive of political communities at different scales. Some forms of political deification operate at the scale of the nation and sovereign authority; other forms operate at the scale of more localised caste-based communities within relatively established political orders; while yet other forms are scaled in ways that enable them to partake in countercultural formations that work to bring new political communities into being in opposition to an established order. But, across scales, all processes of political deification constitute political communities. While we identify many additional commonalities in the forms and practices of political deification across scales, we see martyrdom and suffering as particularly pronounced at the scale of the nation; concerns with religious text and signs as important at the scale of caste-based communities; and a preoccupation with new deities as significant at the scale of counter-cultural formation. Our treatment of political deification in what follows is organised around these scales and themes.

Political deification and martyrdom: nation-building and sovereign authority

The contributions by Ruud and Thiranagama demonstrate the constitutive role of political deification in processes of building a political community at the scale of the nation. Both contributions thus show how the deified icon of a political leader works to cohere a national community and attendant claims to sovereignty.[2]

Thiranagama's article on the Sri Lankan Tamil insurrectionary group, the LTTE, illustrates the deification of its leader Prabhakaran as '*thalaivar*', a complex messianic figure in the Sri Lankan Tamil speaking world. Thiranagama (2022) argues that Prabhakaran, as the leader of the LTTE, sought to become an *ordaining* power, and not simply an *ordained* entity, within a complex religious world. Via a critical examination of the role of the LTTE in cohering a Tamil political imaginary, she argues that the LTTE did not simply reflect a Tamil identity; rather, they used pre-existing Tamil narratives of pain, suffering, and discrimination to reconfigure Tamil identity, produce a political community around it, and hence legitimise their claims to sovereign authority. In other words, her article shows the process of political deification of Prabhakaran as an example of political self-fashioning, based on the usage of cultural and religious narratives and affects. Ruud's article in a comparable manner investigates the deification of

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[2]Political martyrdom is an important subject in postcolonial nations where the moral legitimacy to govern is based on the narratives of colonial atrocities and experiences of suffering—both under and against the regime. This trauma of loss and suffering, under the sign of the martyr as a deified icon, is invoked repeatedly in postcolonial settings towards different political objectives.

Bangabandhu, or Sheikh Mujibar Rahman, the most important nationalist icon of Bangladesh. What Ruud (2022) calls 'the Bangabandhu narrative' is one of political martyrdom based on the suffering, pain, and deaths of Bangladeshi freedom fighters in the violent war of independence in 1971. More specifically, the focus of the narrative is the violent assassination of Bangabandhu himself. These two events – the bloody war of independence in 1971 and the assassination of Bangabandhu in 1975 – are fused in a joint symbol of martyrdom, that of blood, sacrifice, loss, and mourning. In this way, the deified icon of Bangabandhu comes to embody the cataclysmic and époque-defining events that brought the nation itself into being. As a sacred symbol and the nation's immortal sovereign authority, Bangabandhu becomes constitutive of a national political community, while simultaneously allowing the nation to demand submission and loyalty from its citizens. Importantly, Ruud's analysis of Bangabandhu also demonstrates the utility of working with the concept of political deification in contexts where Hinduism is not the dominant religion, a point that we return to in our conclusion.

Political deification and religious signs and texts: cohering caste communities

While the two articles above exemplify the processes and effects of human beings who become deified at the scale of the nation, the articles by Bhattacharya, and George and Narayan analyse how existing Hindu deities are invoked in new ways to build a political community at the level of specific caste groups. In these two articles, we see how the texts, narratives, and symbols associated with now-established minor Hindu deities—Parashuram and Viswakarma—enter the sphere of popular politics to constitute and cohere caste-based communities.

Bhattacharya's article studies the recent and hitherto unexplored phenomenon where Brahmin (priestly caste) men in north India invoke the god Parashuram—literally Ram with an axe, a warrior-like Brahmin and an avatar of Vishnu—to build a masculine Brahmin identity in a context of intense and shifting political competition. The icon of Parashuram is used in contrast to Ram, the mythical kshatriya or 'warrior caste' king who is ubiquitously used by the propagators Hindu nationalism as an icon to constitute the political community of all Hindus at the scale of the nation. Bhattacharya's analysis of the political deification of Parashuram brings out a more caste- and region-specific political consolidation. In doing so, she also effectively uncovers the potential disjuncture between forms of political community-making at different scales. As Bhattacharya (2022) demonstrates, the political deification of Parashuram by Brahmin men in effect amounts to a regional assertion of the supremacy of a masculine upper caste identity, thereby revealing fissures with the Hindu nationalist aspiration of Hindu unity at the scale of the nation. George and Narayan's article similarly focusses on a relatively minor deity, namely Vishwakarma, a Vedic Hindu deity reinvented as a god of technology. More specifically, they analyse the relationship between this deity and his followers among the artisanal castes of Northern India. Arguing that the Hindu texts, or *jati puranas*, provide a mythopolitical foundation for the self-fashioning of these castes, George and Narayan introduce the concept of 'gathering' as a way of understanding the process of forming a political community at the level of caste. To George and Narayan (2022), it is the *purana* text that 'gathers' a caste-based community. These caste-based communities can be thought of as 'object-oriented gatherings' that have

ideological, custodial, and emotional attachments to the *purana*-object. Their case study is based particularly among the Suthars, a hereditary carpenter caste in Gujarat, who have lost the 'original' Vishwakarma *purana*, but now reclaim it through reinvention, new retellings, and new performances across different media. By actively rendering the *puranic* narrative as a 'living thing' through such retellings and recirculation, the Suthar work with and through the *purana* with an eye on the socio-political aspirations of the caste-based community – a community that their reinvented practices simultaneously co-produce.

Political deification and countercultural formations: new deities, new communities

The two cases above are examples of existing deities in the Hindu pantheon who are politically employed for the purpose of socio-political mobilisation of a caste-based community. In both these cases, the caste communities in question are bidding for a stronger position within an ordered logic of Hinduism. The last two articles by Sinharay and Sen, in contrast, show how new deities are fashioned as icons for new social movements and countercultural formations that are subversive of the hierarchical logic of Hinduism. In these two cases, the participants of the movements are from historically oppressed groups, namely Dalits and indigenous communities. Sinharay and Sen both follow the process of building up new symbols, icons, and narratives through which a political community is forged and a social movement is solidified. These cases show powerfully that political deification is not a tool and phenomenon that works only to solidify the power elites; it can also be enlisted as a modality of countercultural formation and resistance to elite domination.

Sinharay's article studies the political deification of the founders of an anti-caste religion called Matua *dharma* of a formerly untouchable community called the Matua, in Eastern India. The founders of Matua *dharma* Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur are highly revered and deified icons among several oppressed caste groups in the region. And, in both national and regional politics, the Matuas have received considerable public attention over the last two decades, as a politically organised and electorally crucial community. Sinharay (2022) argues that a key strategy behind the successful consolidation of the Matuas as a political community has been the use of symbolic means, and the projection of Harichand-Guruchand as regional icons of an oppositional, countercultural Dalit politics. In this regard, Sinharay shows how the processes of deification of Harichand-Guruchand has been crucial to the making of what he calls a new 'Dalit political public' in a region where politics has historically been subject to upper caste dominance. Sen's article looks at the Mahishasur movement in India, a diverse counter-cultural movement headed by indigenous and oppressed-caste groups against hegemonic upper caste Hindu 'storyworlds' and dominance. Supporters of this movement celebrate the martyrdom of Mahishasur during Navaratri. In Hindu mythology, Mahishasur is an evil demon who is eventually defeated by the heroic goddess Durga, who thereby restores order to the universe. However, the followers of Mahishasur claim him as a historical figure, great king, and noble ancestor of indigenous and oppressed communities, who was deceived and killed by the fair-skinned Aryan 'prostitute' Durga, sent by the

scheming male gods who could not match the valour of the great Mahishasur in fair battle. The contemporary leaders of the Mahishasur movement therefore hail him as a martyr and celebrate his forgotten legacy through public events, processions, and propaganda material on social media. This political deification of Mahishasur thereby partakes in the formation of a counterculture that underpins the emergence of a social movement challenging the Brahminical and upper caste dominance of society and polity (Sen 2022).

Conclusion

While our understanding of political deification is built 'from the ground up' in the tradition of grounded theory and ethnographic thinking, we hope that it is also sufficiently generic to invite comparative work in contexts outside of South Asia. Thus, while the six contributions that follow work and grapple with the concept in their respective and specific ethnographic setting in South Asia, our ambition is that it should also be capable of informing scholarly analysis in other parts of the world where political deification exists as a phenomenon. Well-known cases and examples that come to mind as inviting such analysis in fruitful ways would include the Red Tourism in China where travellers visit sites of modern revolutionary significance, including sites connected to Deng and Mao; the imperial cult of Japan; the reverence of the remains of Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam; the treatment of the image of Lenin in Russia; and the reburial of dead bodies in post socialist Europe. In Euro-American contexts, extensive media and political conflicts evidently also showcase the conflicted use of religious symbols by public institutions, or in the public sphere more generally (Wayland 1997; Abdel-Fadil 2017; Lundby 2018). In several such cases, heated discussions have arisen among common people – to various degrees inspired by political parties – to defend or stop the use of such religious symbols (Abdel-Fadil 2019).

At the same time, we also note with interest that 'deification' as a concept is now increasingly 'loose on the street', to borrow a phrase from the Norwegian anthropologist Unni Wikan's discussion of the concept of culture two decades ago. In other words, in both popular and media discourse, the concept of deification is now applied to describe the relationship between political leaders (often of some stature) and their most dedicated followers in a great variety of contexts, both in the global south and north. For example, the relationship between Donald Trump and his following among white Evangelical Christians has been described as one of deification (White 2021); Xi Jinping's spectacular rise to exalted dominance within China's Communist Party has similarly been likened to a process of deification (Gokhale 2020); as for Russia, Western media have often speculated that Vladimir Putin's persistent popularity must be an indicator of his deification in the minds of Russian voters; in Germany, Angela Merkel's handling of the refugee crisis some years back led to 'the elevation and near-deification of Merkel-as-saviour' (Lennard and Hermsmeier 2015) and her appearance on the cover of *Der Spiegel* as Saint Teresa of Calcutta. Perhaps an unlikely candidate for deification, Boris Johnson too has been described as 'an almost religious figure capable of … uniting divisions in the British public through his bully and bluster' (Salder 2020). The fact that the trope of deification circulates so widely in popular discourse on politics in many parts of the world, and apparently appeals intuitively as a way of apprehending and

understanding political processes and practices across very different contexts, may be taken as an invitation to further, careful empirical research. This would, in turn, also makes possible further conceptual sharpening of what we imply by and seek to explain with 'political deification'.

A related point that this invitation to analyse political deification comparatively across contexts in the global north and south also raises is the need for refraining from seeing political deification as an example of 'radical alterity' in the face of the Eurocentrism of theory.[3] The findings in this special issue show that acts of political deification do not signify a radical departure from the inheritance of Eurocentric epistemes in postcolonial South Asian settings. They are not pre-modern or pre-colonial acts; rather, they are borne of postcolonial modernity and they co-exist in the discursive terrain with the so-called Eurocentric tenets of constitutional democracy. In fact, the points at which these interact or contradict each other in popular discourse and practice are precisely where the relationship between the religious and the political—as institutions and affects— becomes salient. On this basis, we find that the application of concepts derived from the global South to Euro-American politics may fruitfully serve to reveal the gaps that exist between liberal political theory and the practice of politics. Current scholarship in the global South is actively pursuing the need to decolonise by building on hybridised emic concepts (Nigam 2020). While this is a long and difficult project, it underscores the importance of building conceptual categories from our fields in the global South. By subsequently recentering these conceptual categories, or conceptual worlds, from the global South, we may also decenter the long-standing European hegemony of political thought. We would like this special issue to be part of this work to foreground concepts from the global South in conversation with cases from the global North.

Notes on Contributors

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Disclosure statement

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[3]Anastasia Piliavsky (2014) introduces her study of political patronage in India with an image of a deified female political leader in North India to argue for eschewing European normative values such as equality in the study of Indian democracies. Sen, in this issue, interprets and argues against this position as 'originalist', demonstrating instead the hybridity of so-called Eurocentric and emic concepts on the grounds of religio-political mobilisation.

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