



Trend of Spiritual Godman in India: Implications for the modern Indian society

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Abstract

When the leading economics of the world like Europe, US, South Korea, Japan are ageing, India can boast of having an increased working population. India will become the 2020 with an average age of 29 as stated by India's High Commissioner to Sri Lanka. This demographic potential can offer huge contribution to the social and economic development of the country. But if millions of people consisting youth adults are seeking relief in the lap of self styled Godman and pursue the illogical path paved by Cults emerging swiftly, the prospective edge could turn into a disaster. The trend of Spiritual Godman who claims themselves as God-incarnate and offers instant gratification is a matter of grave concern as the curiosity and energy of the people must be fed by Scientific and positive thinking rather than ideology of dissemblance. This paper attempt to examine the factors behind the advent of self- styled Godman in India, the place where Gurus of impeccable character had originated; simultaneously the implications of this trend on modern Indian society.

Keywords: god man, spiritual belief, social institutions, vote bank

Introduction

India has a rich history of charismatic spiritual Gurus who enlightened the society with the path of humanity and service. They acted as a guide towards the knowledge of the supreme authority and fertilized the conceptual resources of tolerance of diversity, justice, compassion and loyalty. They played a very important part in the betterment of society through their hard work and social service. They asserted the belief among members of the society that with the help of religions orientation, the divine perfection and goodness can be manifested. Humility and Politeness were assumed to the virtue of spiritual teachers and Gurus. India has been the land of spiritual saints who have brought radical social changes to break the wrong myths of the society. This has certainly helped the nation to stand as one of the most successful democracies of the world. In spite of an array of plurality of religion and culture, India has emerged as a country with unity and integrity. Gautama Buddha, Guru Nanak and Sai Baba are some of spiritual Gurus who have set up spiritual platform based on equality, fraternal love, humanity, goodness, service and virtue. Guru Nanak ji founded Sikhism in the 15th century and stressed upon the faith on one creator, unity of all human kind, selfless service and social justice. Sai Baba taught forgiveness, contentment, inner peace and devotion. Gautama Buddha preached that a man full of desires can never get rid of sorrow. All these great personalities had no love for the perishable worldly things and they taught the world the lesson of love, peace, contentment and honest conduct through manifestation of these virtues in their own life style and behavior.

In the era of modernization, the aim and path to spirituality

both have been defaced. Now some self-styled Godman^[1] are misleading generations for their selfish gains. They proclaim to be having the status of Godman (avatar of God) and possess the mystic knowledge of spirituality which can solve any problem of devotees instantly if the devotee follows the Godman with true heart. In case the devotee does not get instant relief, it may be because of the bad Karma of his body. The Spiritual Godman has ultra luxurious materialistic things and countless wealth. They deserve lavish life style and treatment as they are the representatives of God on this world. Now how the modern society with scientific bent indulge into the worship of these modern spiritual Godman and implications of this emerging trend for the society has become the focus of the present society.

Mankind Prosperity to believe in God

The concept of God, supernatural powers and afterdeath are basic to the nature of human beings. A three-year international research project directed by Dr. Justin Barret and Emily Reed Burdett at the University of Oxford concluded that humans have natural tendency to believe in God. The above mentioned project was conducted in 20 countries and involved 57 researchers who further asserted that worshipping God and denying the existence of supreme power both attitudes are reasoned response to the natural impulses of human kind. The findings of the study further suggest that the people are natural dualists and believe separation of mind and body. All people instinctively believe that some part of mind, soul and spirit lives on even after death. People across the cultures, languages and religions incline to seek purpose behind every event happened or going to happen in life. The individuals who are

¹ Here the term Godman refers to both men and women who claims themselves as incarnate to God and bestowed of magical powers. They present themselves as self-styled God.

bound to religious ties may cooperate more as societies. Thus the above mentioned study emphasized that human beings are naturally inclined to believe in God and relate the various events of their life to the will of a imaginary supreme and pervasive authority. Dr Justin Barret has said, "children the world over have a strong natural receptivity to believing in Gods because of the way their mind works and this early developing receptivity continues to anchor our intuitive thinking throughout life."

So it can be said that the belief in God is not taught and transmitted to generations but human beings are naturally inclined toward their existence of supreme natural power in their lives. The fear for future, the anxieties due to uncertainties and the natural tendencies of believing in God together with the needs of cooperation collectively give rise to the religious beliefs and practices in the world. An Anthropologist Scott Atran of the University of Michigan has beautifully described this phenomenon as "the tragedy of Cognition." Atran said, "Human can anticipate future events, remember the part and conceive of how things could go wrong including their own death, which is hard to deal with." The human beings with the help of natural endowments of their mind & body have evolved the solution to their problems in the form of religions belief and practices. Whenever human beings realize lack of control and predictability in their life, they bent over various explanations and justifications provided by the religion and get the enough support to continue with the realities of world. As human beings are predisposed with the belief in God, they assume personalities associated with the name of God to be true and don't dare usually to object them in case they feel otherwise.

Emerged As Social Heading Therapy of Masses

Religious orientations offer ways to human beings towards contentment and honest conduct. The religious beliefs and practices enhance social cohesion and cooperation among the members of the society. In the history of religious teachings, accumulation of materialistic worldly things and fulfillment of fantasies has never been taught. The impression of modernity on religion has resulted into the evolution of self styled Godman. Godman generates a sense of enchantment among their followers and promises the followers instant relief from all the pain and stress. These Godman emphasize monastic path to salvation and spiritual enlightenment and claims that they can obtain favors of God for their followers. This charismatic healing therapy has become one most significant factor behind the flourishing culture of *Ashrams* and *Deras* of such Godman in society. In Post modern society, people are in rush to attain, achieve and consume within as short time as possible. Instead of doing hard work or exercising self control over material possession, people are moving to the shelter of Babas and Gurus who provides assurance of success, no matter what the aspirations are. There is a massive change in the personal and social orientations of people in the modern society. In the words of Giddens in context of post modern society "To a greater or lesser degree, the project of self becomes translated into one of the possession of desired goods and pursuit of artificially framed styles of life,"

Competitions and Corruption are the two newly emerged orientations of the society which constantly disturbs the inner

peace of individuals. And in this darkness of depression, Godman raises an array of hope by suggesting the ways to achieve the due in the world. There is no filter in the shelter of these Godman and the followers may wish for any worldly desire. If the followers don't get the desired result, it would be only because of the bad karma of the aspirant and he has to follow the path again in order to get success. Poverty, unemployment, crime and corruption have been intruded into the society so that an atmosphere of insecurity and fear has emerged and these Babas provide a sense of comfort through their social healing therapy. The persons with a shattered belief in talent and merit surrendered to the concept of luck and miracles propagated by the modern spiritual showmen. The poor people move to Babas in expectations of a miracle and the elite visits the Babas so that they can justify their deeds of wrongful accumulation of wealth and exploitation of the poor. So Babas have healing therapy for people belonging to all sections of the society and it is evident in case of recent case in Haryana where a Minister of State was bowed down in the Dera of a rape accused Baba. The modern Spiritual Godman has sought the devotion of people ranging from a millionaire to a pauper.

Commodification of Religious Emotions

Earlier religious beliefs and practices were usually limited to the prescribed habits, conduct and life style and that were too gradually inculcated through teachings and self-demonstration to the generations. In the era of marketisation and globalisation, religious sentiments and practices have been commodified. Vineeta Sinha (2010) ^[6] had accounted very well in her book "*Religion and Commodification*" that marketplaces have taken over daily religious practices in the form of various kind of commodities which are strategically placed in the mindset of people. Pattana Kitiarsa (2001) has described in the book titled "*Religions Commodification in Asia*" that there is a shift in the orientations of religious institutions from sacrifice, service and contentment to material prosperity. Kajri Jain (2001) ^[8] has described culture of imaging Gods in market in the book "*Gods in the Bazaar*."

The commodification of religious emotions has facilitated the advent of spiritual Godman in India. These spiritual Godman has a prescription for all kinds of anxieties and fears and the followers can avail the magical remedy with the help of contribution in whatever form and quantity in favor of Religious organisations of the Babas. So it can be rightly said that the a new kind of Baba is emerged out of the commodification of religion who assures his clients of relief from problems with first pay first serve strategy. They impress the masses with ultra luxurious material possessions with them and demonstrate their supreme sense of service by distributing randomly expensive watches, jewellery items, car keys and other materialistic stuff among the crowd came to attend the well planned and organised sessions of Gurus. The followers would definitely be caught by the charm of getting the gifts by luck sometime and with this craving he would be attending the various events of that Dera or Ashram. Such Dera or Ashram besides the donations from the followers get huge profits by selling consumer products with a brand especially endorsed by the Babaji and dedicated devotees do purchase that chain of products out of their blind faith on the

magical powers in the name of spiritual Godman. Such spiritual Godman has turned into sharp entrepreneurs also to cash the emotions of the followers.

Television nowadays is flooded the mythological soaps which have exerted a belief on the people that they God has a radiant face wearing precious ornaments and clothes in a luxurious mansion. So when people see the spiritual Godman who claims to be avatar of God, they just bind by the impression developed by the televisions. But the world of spiritual Godman is also competitive one so they have to develop a particular style and charismatic appeal among the followers to retain the crowd.

Festivals and special occasions were earlier celebrated to invoke the particular values and spirit associated with the event but now the marketplaces do the special preparations to introduce to the people every single emotion associated with the festival in the form of commodities. The market creates such an atmosphere that even the poor people are compelled to buy something in fear of non-compliance of traditions.

Social Institutions Loosing Grip

Modernisation, Globalisation and Revolution in information and communication technologies have brought drastic changes in our social life. The charm of various avenues provided by social media and modern life style has led to erosion of traditional values and social life. Earlier, the Social Institutions like family and marriage were used to be responsible for developing a sense of integration and stability among the members of the society. Now the values of affection, tolerance, cooperation and service are lost in the dazzle of the aspirations of modern life. Insecurity and fear of uncertainty has taken over the mental peace and contentment of the individuals. The priorities of life have been changed and the culture of pretense is pervasive where the emotions and fears are artificially created and marketed as commodities. Even the existence of social institutions is endangered in the society that has witnessed a merciless murder of a 5 year old child on 8th September 2017 by 16 years old boy of the same school in the school premises in Gurugram. The motive found behind the murder is rather more shocking. The teenager killed the little child brutally only to get his exams postponed (The Tribune 10th Nov. 2017 Chandigarh). It has reflected that somewhere the roots of the Social Institutions like family and education got effete. The Social Institutions are failing in front of providing support and guidance so that inappropriate orientations of the individuals may be channelized. In the traditional society religion, caste, kinship and marriage were the main determinants of personal as well as social beliefs and code of conduct. In the modern society, the ruthless competitive spirit and appetite for accumulation of more and more materialistic things had germinated the seeds of identity crisis and mental stress. In the absence of basic social relationships, individuals have sought relief, affection and support in the resort of modern spiritual Godman who puts the ointment of mesmerizing words and creates illusionary atmosphere of satisfaction. Mary Garden (2003) has stated her experiences of travelling to India and how she has been deceived by various spiritual Godman in the name of spiritual enlightenment. She left the postgraduate studies at Auckland University and came to India to seek enlightenment as she got

influenced by some Godman who visited New Zealand. She has been misguided, exploited and tortured at several ashrams where she resided during her stay in India. At last she left India with an experience of mental imprisonment. Nita Mathur (2015) ^[5] explains that social institutions have now become fuzzy and consequently raised the level of uncertainty when one struggles with the newly emerged expectations, aspirations and subjectivities. In order to release the frustration and anxieties, people may seek recourse in Godman. The Godman cash the vulnerability and instability of people which is emerged out of the malfunctioning of the Social Institutions. In the absence of basic Social Institutions which are fabricated to provide support, guidance and care; members of the society move to Babas.

Vote Bank Politics Perpetuate Blind Faith

The Ashrams of the Spiritual Godman operate with a strategy to attract devotees, maintain the number of followers and at the same time to increase the existing pool of followers. Nith Mathur (2015) ^[5] has mentioned that these Ashrams are equipped with modern information and communication technologies and gadgets that are used for creating new team of followers simultaneously maintaining the existing one. With the help of donations in the name of Ashrams and associated organisations like hospitals, schools and other rehabilitation homes from the devotees all over the world, the Babas have accumulated empire of wealth and social capital. Besides the funds from donations, the various signature product brands help the Ashrams to compile huge resources. Now the combination of human as well as economic resources allures politicians to get closely associated with the Babas so that the huge fan following can be turned into their vote bank. To reach out the masses, the politicians find an easy and quick way in the form of Babas or Godman. This is when the power of Godman gets consolidated due to the patronage of politicians and they dare to exploit and torture the devotees. When these Babas or Godman obtain the attention and accompaniment of the politicians, faith of the masses becomes stronger and the aspirations associated with these Godman take a new height. Although the common man is completely unaware of the fact that the Godman and the politicians have joined hands so that the people's blind faith in the Godman may be maintained and can be turned into vote bank whenever the associated political party wish for. In the elections of Haryana legislative assembly in 2014, the impact of support of the Godman to a political party was proved very influential for the voters and Bhartiya Janta Party as a supported political party came up with a clean majority in the assembly elections. It was for the first time in the history of Haryana State Elections, that a Godman had publically supported a political party. But in this deal, the common man seems to be at loss severely. If the politically parties who are responsible for the social and economic development of the common people promote the faith in Godman, the future of scientific and rational thinking may get lost in darkness of blind faith of magical blessings and charismatic powers. The vote bank politics is one of the most important factors which have supported the maintenance of Godman Culture in India. Instead of inspiring people to explore the physical world, some political parties are pushing the people towards

exploring the mystical world.

Resort to Anti-Social Activities

The bloom of Godman in India has given a new face to corruption and deceit already existing in India. With rooted religious orientations, the Indian society has been always vulnerable to the spiritual illusions and claims. Some self-oriented and corrupt persons had adopted the way of religious faith to inculcate blind acceptance among the members of the society. They found it easy to convince people in the name of religion as people usually surrender when it comes to God and religion in India. Once convinced, they fall prey to various superstitious, flawed customs and irrelevant beliefs. The unquestionable faith is deliberately and strategically planned so that it can be used to channelize the resources of society in the manner the Godman wish to. The blind faith of the followers got so much strong that even reporting of various kind of molestation, assault, corruption and forgery cases against the Godman couldn't impact the mindset of people. As mentioned earlier also, the extent of poverty, unemployment, crime, corruption and forgery is so widespread that the people are unable to cope with the magnitude of troubles and eventually seek solace in the alluring maxims of such Godman. Political patronage and blind faith of the masses collectively provide strength to such Godman to chalk out anti-social activities to satisfy their own selfish needs simultaneously to flourish their empire of wealth and power. Such Godman with delinquent intentions preach the lesson of contentment and service to the masses and at the backstage runs the illegal activities very smoothly. The Case of Baba Rampal in the Rohtak district of Haryana exemplifies how the self-styled spiritual Godman tactfully disguising the devastating activities inside the veil of religious demeanor. Although they claim relief and emancipation from worldly discomforts, pains and diseases but they definitely don't mind jeopardizing lives of millions of people as evident in case of Panchkula Riots in August 2017 when Baba Ram Rahim came to CBI court for hearing. Another perspective on Deras and Ashrams becoming resort to the anti-social elements in that at in India people don't have a tendency to doubt the intentions of person who claims or owes religious orientations. So it is very much easier accomplishing all the illegitimate activities as the chances of being questioned is very remote. Rape, murder, exploitation, captivation and holding huge black money are commonly reported cases recently against such Babas in India. These are the cases which somehow able to come into notice publically, but it is really difficult to estimate the extent of heinous acts that are being done all over India in the mysterious world of spiritual Godman.

Godman Who Could Not Save Themselves

The past few years have witnessed how some spiritual Godman has been putted behind the bars for their erroneous acts. However the conviction against them by the Judiciary had a little impact on their blind following as they have polished the mindset of masses and posed all the actions as conspiracy of those people who does not believe in them. The devotees are very much convinced that in the way of practicing spiritual beliefs and social service, hurdles may come to obstruct the way. It is important to understand here

for the people who keep blind faith in the magical powers of so called self styled Godman that if these spiritual Babas had charismatic power, they could have saved themselves from various conspiracies and allegations consists of heinous acts like rape and murder. The spiritual Godman claims to relieve their devotees from all kind of distress but still are yet to attain control on their own instincts and senses which the major requisite to attain spiritual enlightenment is. On 1st Sep 2013, Jodhpur Police arrested Asharam Bapu from his Ashram on charges of sexual assault of a 16 years girl on the pretext of existing her from evil spirits. In December 2013, Asharam Bapu's son was also arrested on the charge of rape. A self declared religious Guru in Haryana, Rampal has been found guilty of illegally confining thousands of followers and even obstructing the police officials of Haryana to enter into the Ashram in Rohtak. Six people were killed and 100 of people injured in the confrontation between police and the devotees. Recently in August 2017, another self-styled Guru Ram Rahim was arrested by the Haryana police against the charges of sexual assault of a sadhvi and convicted 20 years of imprisonment and penalty. Now the devotees have to take a rational call to apprehend the gravity of the situation where a bunch of tricksters are taking benefit of lack of scientific thinking and logical attitude among the masses. Our first and foremost commitment is to work towards the betterment of our country and to achieve the social and economic development of the nation. The members of the society have to get themselves out from the grip of all those imposters and deceivers who pretend to be God or God incarnate. The blind faith of the masses legitimizes the spiritual Godmen to use the social and economic resources for their selfish interests. So people should stop believing without giving a rational thought to curb the trend of fake Gurus.

Believe In What We Have Inside

"You cannot always control what goes on outside. But you can control what goes on inside" (Wayne Dyer). All the external forces can rule us only when we surrender ourselves to their powers. The spiritual Godman has captivated the mindset and belief system of the people. In order to conquer, people have to believe their inner self and must realize that it is only their own self who can bring changes for good. However, the role of guidance and support could be needed at any phase of life but for that sake one must not sacrifice prudence and sense of judgment. We must acquire knowledge and may resort to enlightened personalities for the pursuit of goals of life but the mind and the body should always be in self control only. The members of the modern society have to understand that the self oriented minds are just harnessing the emotions of the masses in their own favors. The affection and sense of belongingness that people find while associating with the so called Ashrams and Deras is just an illusion strategically inculcate to rule the mindsets. Lee Thayer (2017) ^[7] has put it rightly in the book "*Perspectives: How our lives get channeled*" that the belonging felt by forming into us and them categories fades in modernity to something more like me and them" being the rest of the that has no more than marketing interest in my "existence."

In the era of marketisation, every article is just rightly put in to cash the fears, emotions and dreams of masses. Recently when

the newspapers and the other avenues of social media have been flooded with concerns over smog in Delhi, Haryana and Punjab, air purifiers have been placed in the market as saviors. Religion seems to help the market forces to exaggerate and underestimate the things. The modern spiritual Godman execute the exploitation of masses by holding it as a result of their bad *Karma* and stimulate the faith in miracles and good luck in life to maintain the interest of people in their orientations. Steve Bruce (2000) put it rightly and argues that religion can be used to strengthen the existing divisions and reinforce the sources of conflicts present in the society.

To combat the mysterious forces, the human kind has to believe that the divine perfection already exists in them and they just have to recognise the natural endowment they are blessed with. There is no harm in believing in religion indeed religion may be a unifying force capable of providing strength and stability in life. But fabricated religious sentiments which stimulate belief in bewitchment and magical powers should be condemned.

Conclusion

Blind faith in mysterious powers is as lethal as cancer. This has two implications. Firstly the diagnosis of the blind faith is very difficult as it is concerned with the understanding and attitude of people. Secondly the treatment is awful as the emotions and life orientations of the followers are at stake. To build up a society free of such inclinations towards superstitions and magical powers is challenging especially in case of India where people belong to thousand of castes with different prescription of path to be followed for a good life. Inculcation of a scientific attitude with the objective sense of judgment is fundamental to discard any mysterious influence on our inclination and orientations. The system of education can be very helpful where the new generations may be taught with the belief that the human beings have innate powers to explore the physical world and also imbedded with extreme potential to achieve heights. We have to curb the fear among the people from corruption and favoritism so that they no more fall prey to Godman for the sake of persuasion. In one of the world's biggest democracy, there is a need of times that people must understand that they have a chance to participate in the Governance through their voting powers. The moment they will start using their voting powers rationally and without any influence exerted by some self-oriented religious Guru, the use of easy vote bank provided by the spiritual Godman would definitely be curtailed. Nita Mathur (2015) ^[5] puts rightly Dipankar Gupta (2000) ^[3] in his words, to stop the rise of Godman, the society must graduate to a society which is characterised by "Dignity of the individual; adherence to universalistic norms; elevation of individual achievement over privileges or disprivileges of birth; accountability in public life."

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