

The conversation started with my asking Suraj Prakash about his daughter's treatment. Suraj Prakash is our neighbourhood cobbler who has been sitting under the giant *peepul* tree at the crossroads for as long as I can recall. His very dark complexion is enhanced by his white hair and beard as well as the vitiligo all over his face.

The last time I had met him, he told me about his daughter who had been having some mental illness. Of course, he did not say this- for him it was the neighbour, with whom some dispute had happened years ago and who had gotten someone to do black magic on her. She had not been the same since then and now, though married, had been living with him since the husband had left her after finding out about the illness. When I asked him if he had gotten her checked by a doctor, he told me that he had spent lakhs in getting all the tests and treatment done in various hospitals but to no avail. And so, for the last many years, he had been trying various *Babas, pirs and shamans*.

I knew all this and so when I asked him as to who is treating her now, he told me about Bhole Baba. Bhole Baba is the godman at whose *satsang* more than a hundred women and children died in a stampede. As it happened, Suraj Prakash was there for the *satsang* since he is a devotee. And he started relating to me all the wonderful miracles that the Baba had performed over the years. How there is a spring which the Baba had blessed, the water from which can cure any disease. How, despite being at a very high post in the police (the Baba was a lowly constable), he left it all to take the religious path. How the Baba insists that no money or gifts be given to him and in fact had donated land worth crores which he owned to various causes. It was clear that Suraj Prakash was convinced about the sainthood of the Baba.

I asked him about the stampede itself and sure enough he gave me the party line- that the Yadavs in the area were jealous of Baba's popularity and so disguised as his devotees, came to the *satsang* and spread some poisonous substance in the air which rendered many in the congregation unconscious and led to the stampede. Incidentally, a few days later, this was precisely the story that the Baba gave to the media.

I listened to all this and wondered why people like Suraj Prakash would get taken in by the obvious propaganda when, these very same people would ordinarily see through a charlatan? The lazy answer would be lack of education, but then the various godmen who thrive in our country have devotees ranging from judges to scientists. Possibly the answer lies in our inner most fears and the need for succor.

There is of course another aspect of this whole phenomenon. This is the power of networking which works in surprisingly simple ways. A devotee requests the Baba to do something about his young son who is unemployed and has fallen in bad company. The Baba asks one of his industrialist devotee or a high ranking government official devotee to take care of the matter. Voila! The boy is given a contractual job in a factory or better still, in a government office. The news spreads about how the Baba made the boy's life. Fixing things for his devotees, through his devotees is one of the best forms of PR for the Baba.

But clearly, this is not why Suraj Prakash is so blindly devoted to Bhole Baba. For him, it is a matter of trying out anything which will cure his daughter. Of course, there have been documented cases of faith healing, especially for mental illnesses. Suraj Prakash has tried everything- allopathic and ayurvedic doctors, sadhus and *pirs*, all in the hope that something will work. After all, what other option does he have?

I have seen this kind of blind faith in others also- years ago, a cousin of mine was suffering from a neurological disorder which was later diagnosed as Multiple Sclerosis. There was no cure for it at that time and so that doctors had told them that it can only be managed but not cured. However, his parents always believed that it was someone who had done a spell and so right until his death, continued visiting all kinds of godmen and doing what they asked them to do. Once again, this was their only hope.

Our vulnerabilities because of our very human fears of death and disease are possibly as old as humankind. To these primitive fears, we can now add the dread of financial ruin. It is also our natural desire to have someone to whom we can transfer our problems which could possibly explain why most people would blindly follow anyone who offers a ray of hope. There is also, I think, comfort in numbers as well as a sense of belonging to a community, especially now that most of us lead an atomized existence.

In a situation where one finds oneself without any hope, I am not sure how many of us would behave "rationally" and dismiss these "superstitions". After all, all of us know some very rational people, even atheists, who, for instance, when faced with an incurable illness, would not mind going to a holy man who claims to cure the illness by giving a talisman. Would I behave any differently? I don't know since I have not been in such a situation.

I asked Suraj Prakash whether Bhole Baba, whom he addresses as Bhagwan, has been able to help his daughter. This was obviously an uncomfortable question and he looked at me in a somewhat irritated manner. "The black magic which was done on her was a very powerful one- this is the reason she has not been cured for so many years. But now that we are with Bhagwan, I have no doubt she will be fine". How can one blame him for hoping against hope? After all, what else can he do?

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