

Guru Power

Riding on the exponential power of networks, godmen and charlatans like Guruji exploit the fraternal feeling amongst fellow followers to offer specious solutions.

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The entrance to the house is a small doorway which opens directly into a lane which straddles an open sewer. The house itself is nondescript—one of the many small tenements built on 50 yards allotted to the Partition refugees in the city. We enter a small living-cum-bedroom which is cramped with a sofa set and a divan. A short, portly figure lies sprawled on the divan. My father promptly touches his feet and we take our place on the floor.

The gentleman on the divan is Guruji. His daytime job is pushing files as a lower-division government clerk. But my father has recently been convinced that he is a holy man with immense powers. I have been brought to him to witness some of these powers. Guruji's spiritual prowess lies in curing people of incurable illnesses—not to mention helping them escape unemployment.

But then, that day, when I sat at the feet of Guruji, these feats were to be presented to me as irrefutable evidence of his multifarious powers. In his right palm, the sacred symbol Om was visible. He blesses me with prasad and invites me to observe the Om. I try hard and despite him pointing it out, I am unable to discern anything resembling the flourish of the primordial symbol. My father is disappointed that even this visit has been unsuccessful in converting his atheist son to the ways of God.

That was in 1978. Over the next few years, Guruji's name and fame spread. Politicians, top bureaucrats and wealthy businessmen were to be counted amongst his devotees. Soon the small tenement was replaced by a palatial house in a posh locality built by his devotees who now numbered in tens of thousands. Every Thursday there would be a huge line in front of the house to get darshan of Guruji. And on special occasions like Shivratri or Guru Purnima, the lines would extend for more than a couple of kilometres. People would come from all over North India and line up for his blessings. The local shopkeepers were thrilled since this meant good customers.

The usual stories of people being cured of cancers and other ailments abounded. As did many stories of the devotees' worldly problems being solved automatically. Guruji was not very demanding of his followers—one only had to wear a copper *kadha* and on Thursdays abstain from non-vegetarian food and alcohol as well as, for some curious reason, washing one's hair or clothes. Not much of a sacrifice, for most people.

All this was mildly amusing and, I must confess, irritating to my teenaged rational mind. Healing ailments with nothing more than a few cardamoms seemed a bit too simple. But the stories were legion. What could possibly explain tens of thousands of people believing in a charlatan?

It was only much later that I realised why people flocked to the man, or indeed to any of the Babas and Matajis. Chronically ill patients got a lot of emotional succour from their belief in the curative powers of the holy man. This, of course, had a positive effect on their body's immune system. If nothing else, the hope itself, even if it was a delusion, was enough to sustain them and their near and dear ones. I had seen this with a close relative who was suffering from an incurable disease—degenerative multiple sclerosis. There was no medicine for this deadly disease and it was clear

that the patient was getting worse by the day. Nevertheless, every time his parents visited Guruji or any other healer, they would insist that the patient was much better. Of course, neither I nor, for that matter, the doctors could see any improvement—but that was not the point. The parents of the teenaged boy lived in hope that this gradual improvement would lead to a full-blown cure at some point. And this was enough for them. Nothing could convince them that they were deluding themselves.

Of course, the human body being such a complex system and with so little known about the interconnections of the mental and the physical beings, it is not inconceivable that in some cases, genuine improvement is seen with the power of faith. We know, for instance, that the human immune system is very closely related to the levels of stress in the mind. So the cases where real or imaginary healing takes place are difficult to analyse unless one does a control experiment.

The other thing which worked in this ecosystem was the power of networks. It is well known that beyond a critical number of members, the power of networks grows almost

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exponentially. Think of Facebook—the more people join, the more people are inclined to join since that is where they find most connections. A very similar thing worked in the case of Guruji.

Take the case of an epileptic patient. His parents were depressed since though Guruji had “controlled” the disease, there was still the issue of his marriage. On the other hand, there was this other devotee from a far-off city who had a daughter for whom finding a match was proving a bit tough because of her complexion. Presto, the holy man “ordered” that the two were to be married. And they did. In one stroke, two problems were solved!

Or the case of another devotee whose son was unemployed—one phone call from Guruji to an industrialist devotee got him a job. Similarly one phone call to the local sales tax commissioner, who also happened to be a devotee, solved the sales tax issue of another devotee. A word to a politician enabled a contractor to bag a contract.

These are very tangible benefits for most people. In our society, where so much still depends on whom one knows, these networks are immensely useful. What’s more, the networks work in strange ways—the fraternal feeling amongst fellow followers of the same Guruji can work wonders in many situations, even without the direct intervention of the holy man. Many a time, my father would go to a government office, and it would turn out that the official would spot the copper kadha on my father’s wrist and instantly recognise that my father was a fellow devotee. Needless to add, the work at the office would then get done without any hitch.

Alas, Guruji was also a mere mortal. And there came a time when his health started failing and no amount of medical intervention could save him. After his “Samadhi,” Mrs Guruji became the caretaker of the congregation and though the crowds continued for some time, things were not the same. A small core group of devotees stayed but the long queues vanished over time.

My father, who was one of the earliest followers, had, in the meantime, got disillusioned when access to Guruji started being controlled by the rich and the powerful. It didn’t help that by then my father had also found another holy man to be devoted to! This was great for us—at least one could once again enjoy a drink and eat some chicken on Thursdays!

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