

FROM WINNING HEARTS TO MANIPULATING MINDS: GODMEN AND THEIR FOLLOWERS

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this paper is to study the motivation behind following the self-proclaimed godmen. We conduct in-depth interviews of the family members of the subject followed by two real case analyses. The cases are discussed in the light of theoretical models and review of research literature the researchers attempt to explain what sustains the retention of followers in such organizations. The paper will generate awareness among the followers to create a distinction between faith and blind faith and will shed light on what psychologists can do for the mental well-being of the followers.

KEYWORDS: *Self-Proclaimed Godmen, Followers, Society, Mental Health*

INTRODUCTION

India has always been the land of spirituality. Spirituality is an expression that helps us in understanding the relationship between ourselves and something greater which compels us to seek answers about the infinite. Spirituality is considered by many psychologists to be an inherent property of the human being (Helminiak, 1996; Newberg, D' Aquili, & Rause, 2001). From this viewpoint, human spirituality is an attempt to understand and connect to the unknowns of the universe or search for meaningfulness in one life (Adler, 1932/1980; Frankl, 1959). One can be spiritual without being religious (eg. a seeker of a relationship with the creator without belonging to the particular practice of that relationship).

In today's world, the gurus (Godmen and Godwomen) have found a prominent place in mediating spiritual experiences of the individuals. Gurus are often considered as mentors, teachers or guides who help in eradicating the mental and spiritual darkness with their teachings. They command a lot of respect, faith, and authority among their followers. The phenomenon of gurus in India has been in existence for a very long time and among all sects of people. India has had a rich tradition of saints like Guru Nanak Dev, Meera Bai, and the Sufi saints like Hazrat Nizamuddin, among many others which are acclaimed in global arena, who have enriched Indian culture and inculcated universal values in people during their times and proved that human beings could set free themselves from the slavery of the materialistic world. Specifically, in the Hindu context, the importance of gurus can be traced back to some of the holy scriptures. For instance, in the Guru-Gita, which is considered as one of the holy books of Hindus, it is stated that guru is the source (Brahma), the sustenance (Vishnu) and end (Maheshwara) of my existence and I surrender myself to my guru (Guru-Gita).

Each guru has his/her own style of preaching such as through meditation, chanting of mantras, spreading the lesson of love and peace. They also seem to practice themselves and to their followers the renouncing of worldly affairs, material wealth, fame and other luxuries. Although human beings are naturally inclined towards the existence of supreme natural power. Additionally, every follower has his/her own personal reasons for following them. Sources have shown that these organizations founded by godmen have a following of more than 60 million worldwide (Dera Sacha Sauda, India) and so on and so forth.

Aligned with the above view, the **objectives of the paper** are

- To study the motivation behind the following of self-proclaimed godman
- To review the literature on the impact of self-proclaimed godman on followership
- To analyze two of the real-life cases on the behavior and mental health of the followers
- To suggest implication based on the research review and real-life case studies

Aligned to the above mentioned objective number one, literature explained that a large number of people follow gurus just because of curiosity and inquisitiveness, they become interested in spiritual practices and wish to meet a few enlightened experts to clarify their doubts. There are people who are following the guru as it was inherited by their parents and they will pass on the same ritual to their next generation. In the researcher's experience people has mentioned that there is no personal wish to follow or worship a guru but they are following because their parents want them to. There are many states in India also where people are considered untouchable if they do not have any guru who could guide them about spirituality and religion. Other reasons could be dependence, to seek attention and approval, faith, to seek advice and so on. Few reasons could be personal problems, insecurities, and difficulties, keeping the belief that guru has the power to fulfill their wishes and remove their wrong deeds (karma). Subsidized food and free medicines provided by the gurus is another huge attraction as this is a boon for poor people. For many people gurus work as psychotherapists as followers believe that the guru is the safest place for catharsis. Confession is a very active and old practice in the Catholic church. It has been estimated that there are between 500 and 800 different such organizations active in the United Kingdom with membership ranging from under ten people to thousands (Tobias and Lalich, 1994).

In support of objective number two, it has been seen that the path of spirituality has deviated from its original motive. It has inclined towards exploitation of followers psychologically, financially as well as physically. Many of the godmen and god-women have found themselves embroiled in controversies. And some of the devotees themselves help the godmen in such acts. These devotees can be categorized into two. One who genuinely promote the preaching of their guru, and has no hidden agenda. They pass on their teachings as their only interest is to enlighten the followers. Whereas, the other one is those who misguide the new followers by showing unreal practices of gurus as they have a purpose behind it. They even get paid for attracting followers.

The story does not end at increasing the number of followers. It is also important for them that the followers must stay in the organization. Robert Lifton (1961) described eight themes of thought reform that how members of cults¹

¹ Cult can be defined as a particular type of relationship that not only is based on an enormous power imbalance but also includes a hidden agenda.

become influenced and effectively trapped psychologically. The eight themes are milieu control (total control of communication in the group), Loading the language (whole new meanings are assigned to the words), demand for purity (only the group has superior access to ultimate truth), confession (it offers the individual a sense of intensive psychological relief), mystical manipulation (how group members should think, act and feel), sacred science (members are advised to acquire an unquestioning acceptance of group belief), doctrine over person (shaping the reality in which group member must exist) and dispensing the existence (drawing a sharp line between those who has a right to exist and those who do not). This whole process of changing personality gives birth to a fanatic follower where he denies to accept the truth beyond the group.

In the west, many researchers understood the need of studying this area and find out that regardless of the common misbelief that only crazy, unstable or weird people are in cults, research has proved that most members are of above average intelligence, comes from stable backgrounds and do not have any history of psychological illness. Cults search for active, productive, intelligent, energetic individuals who will execute for the cult by fundraising, recruiting and operating cult owned businesses (Janja Lalich, 1997). Schwartz & Kaslow, 1979 has paid attention in the professional literature to the cult phenomenon: what it is, how it attracts converts, what differentiates the vulnerable youth from the non vulnerable: the impact of cult membership on the converter's family, and specifically, in what ways the family can be helped during and after indulging with the cult The authors have drawn on clinical observations, interviews, and extensive literature from a range of disciplines in building a portrait of the vulnerable youth. The unpredictable behavior, rapid mood swings, role confusion, and identity diffusion, described so clearly by Erikson (1950), parallels the general profile that appears in the literature about the young people successfully recruited by the cults. Cult recruiters are trained to look for the apparently friendless and "lost". Isolated from the familiar and surrounded with a smothering blanket of "love", based on a well-devised strategy called "love bombing" (JCRC Report, 1976), the recruit feels guilty if he rejects the messages being given him. As the "visit" continues, the group focuses on the recruit's weakness, assaulting aspects of his previous identity, and applying the principles of behavioral reinforcement systematically. Janja Lalich, 1997 described the prevalence of the sexual exploitation of women in cults. Sexual control is seen as the final step in the objectification of the cult member by the authoritarian leader who is able to satisfy his needs through psychological manipulation leading to sexual exploitation.

The literature itself narrates that some of these organizations successfully influenced the followers to the level that they lost their lives. In the west, many of these organizations assured future heaven on earth and others predicted the end of the world. Some claiming it for the year 2000 others the year 2001. The date for the end of the world can be quite peculiar. It was, for instance, believed by the Movement for the Restoration of the Twelve Commandments to be due in March 2000, when more than 1000 members of this particular Ugandan cult lost their lives, many through strangulation. The death toll was a clear illustration of what seem to be some form of extreme control exercised within such groups.

No wonder that devotees are attached to their gurus in India as well. India is one of the leading countries where people are so dependent on their gurus but no such research was done to rule out the factors leading to following of these gurus. Most of the incidents about the gurus have been extensively covered in the mainstream media, yet we see that it has not influenced the following of these godmen. In some of the most recent cases, there has not only been convictions of these godmen, but their followers have gone out on the streets and have resorted to violent means of protest. the blind faith of followers has gone so strong that even reporting of various kind of molestation could not change the mindset of people.

A self-proclaimed godman from Haryana was accused of involvement in a murder case dating from 2006 and for contempt of court. His supporters threw stones and opened fire when police tried to raid his ashram. Five women and one child died in the incident (BBC News, November 2014). A self-proclaimed godman from Orissa, India who would claim to be an incarnation of *Lord Krishna* and asked his young female devotees to serve him as gopis. The baba (Godman) has a close group of 20-22 women followers, all in their 20s, with whom he allegedly spends exclusive time at his private chamber in the ashram. In August 2015, the baba has been arrested on the charge of cheating, forgery, criminal intimidation, and conspiracy. His devotees protested against the court to defend him for weeks. In August 2017, when another baba (Godman) declared as guilty in the conviction of rape, more than 30 people died, more than 300 people injured in protest after godman (The Tribune, August 2017). Curfew was declared in seven districts of Punjab and three cities of Haryana during the protest. Another self-proclaimed guru found guilty of raping a teenage girl from north India (The Times of India, 25 April 2018). Not only these incidences narrate the impact of self-styled godman, but we also get to see much news in newspapers related to fraud and assault by these self-proclaimed godmen. It is very difficult to imagine how people get emotionally attached to their guru (godman) that they forget the crime committed by him/her.

This context is surprising at two levels. First, the outright refusal of the followers to change their views despite the presence of evidence and due course of law. Second, the usage of violence to meet their objectives, whereas godmen claim to teach and preach values that propagate peace, love, and harmony. And those who accept that their guru committed such act, lose all their faith. It becomes difficult for them to restore the faith later in life. It may be possible to overcome materialistic damage but it is very difficult to heal the psychological damage. As mentioned earlier, 30 people died during the protest, it may not affect the guru but it has a great impact on their family members.

Two of the real cases shows the real condition of the followership in India, particularly which supports objective number three.

Case Study 1

The researcher had spent quality time on the interview with family members for 2 days two hours each by taking their permission and convenient time. On being asked, they narrated the case discussed below.

Mr. A², 30 years old adult graduated, belonged to middle socioeconomic status, unemployed grown up in a rural area of district Saharanpur was diagnosed with moderate depression and was taking medication for the same. He was the follower of self-proclaimed Godman since childhood as his mother and grandmother were also followers of the godman. His mother and grandmother would visit the ashram of godman every month and he would also visit the Ashram four to five times a year and would spend 3 to 4 days during every visit.

In August 2017 the disciples of the self-proclaimed godman visited his hometown and distributed some biscuits as “Prashad” and convinced the villagers to visit the city (Panchkula, Haryana) as the godman has called very renowned doctors from various big cities who would treat the needed patients and the Guruji will also be there to shower his blessings. An’s mother forced him to visit the city. According to his mother, this would be a great chance to serve guruji and meet doctors who could help him in the treatment of depression. He visited the city along with his friends. Later, followers realized that there were no doctors, instead, they were called to protest against the court as the godman was

² The real names are hidden to maintain the confidentiality of subjects.

embroiled in the conviction of rape. While protesting against the court, the police arrested them and sent them to prison for creating the nuisance and protesting against the court decision. In prison, his treatment was disrupted. The disrupted treatment and embarrassment became the triggering factors and he developed the symptoms of severe depression which lead to suicidal tendencies. After a few days of his stay in prison, he strangled himself to death.

Case Analysis 1

In the above-mentioned case, Mr. A lost his life as the event created by the godman and other followers triggered his illness. It is worth mentioning to give clear cut to support the event with Skinner's theory of operant conditioning- the idea that behavior is determined by its consequences. Mr. A started following the guru which lead him to worship him on a regular basis. Regular worshipping of the guru developed intense faith in the guru. Having faith in the guru and with the hope of getting better treatment, Mr. A visited the city where he accidentally involved himself in the incidence which eventually led him to death. Not just the individual but their families also suffer mental trauma. This whole scenario can be seen from various perspectives. As discussed above most of the people are following these godmen as this was inherited to them along with physical property by their elders. The elders of the family make sure that the guru must be worshipped with utmost respect and faith. They teach their children that they must follow the guru irrespective of their will and condition them likewise. They follow certain fixed patterns of living their lives as well as develop a faith that whatever the guru says, it's the ultimate truth and it must be followed. But sometimes, this faith turns into blind faith where the man loses faith in himself and become deprived of decision-making ability and then he/she become dependent on the external source (guru).

Case Study 2

The following was reported in a newspaper.

Ms. K, a 17-year-old female from an urban area of district Sangrur diagnosed with asthma was taking treatment from various doctors but her illness was not cured. Her mother then took her to a godman at a nearby village in October 2017 as she feared that the girl was under the influence of an evil spirit. The godman started calling Ms. K and her mother to his house every Saturday. In Dec 2017 the godman asked the mother to wait in a room and took Ms. K to another room, where he allegedly raped her on the pretext of treating her. Later, he also sexually assaulted her at her house and other places. On becoming pregnant, Ms. K informed her parents about the incidences, following which a case has been registered against the godman.

*Source: The Tribune, July 15, 2018

Case Analysis 2

In the latter case, Ms. K suffered sexual assault by the godman. In India, not just the rural population but also the urban population have faith in black magic and superstitions and do not consider unpopular disease as a disease rather believe it is happening under the influence of some evil spirit. This unawareness took Ms. K's mother to the godman for the treatment which eventually leads to the sexual exploitation of Ms. K. Isn't hard to believe how people exploit others right under their nose and they don't even feel victimized by the time a big loss actually occurs. It is worth thinking where this blind faith is taking us.

IMPLICATIONS

The above-mentioned literature and cases indicate that psychologists need to be aware of the problem of psychological damage. There is a need for both mental health practitioners and legal practitioners to familiarise themselves with issues relating to the potential sequelae of membership of such groups. There should be some forum where victims can file their complaint against any kind of exploitation because in most of the cases people do not know their rights and don't want to follow the long process of filing a complaint and that is why the godmen keep exploiting them. It is also important to comprehend the reason behind following such misleading godmen. This is the period where people are dealing with a high level of stress, anxiety, and competition, and social-spiritual psychology could be beneficial to deal with such problems without getting exploited. The education system can be helpful in this as children should be taught various other methods of dealing with their emotional and psychological issues rather going to such outside agency.

CONCLUSIONS

In the era of globalization and modernization, where other countries like USA, Japan, Canada, Russia are dealing with technology and its development, India is somewhere stuck at the blind belief that some man who claims himself as the incarnate of the God would solve all the problems by raising his hand. It's not the story of just one or two states, there are millions of followers in every state. Unfortunately, this belief has gone to the level that followers are ready to accept whatever they are being told by their guru without raising any question. They are following the rules of the institution which includes all the basic activities like eating, bathing, also the fixed pattern of having sex. It has been seen people not respecting their parents, misbehaving with them and sending them to old age homes but they are worshipping the gurus and doing whatever is told by the guru. The literature and the incidences mentioned above speaks itself the need to understand the strategy of these groups and godmen whose purpose is to exploit the followers and adopt healthy ways of dealing with such issues.

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