

IN BLACK
&
WHITE



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BHANAMATHI

The scourge of Hyderabad Karnataka

*What's the mystery behind the Black Magic
called Bhanamathi ?*

Narendra Nayak tries to find out.



Bhanamathi affected people

While all types, forms and varieties of black magic are to be expected in a superstitious country like ours, Bhanamathi the form of Black Magic supposedly practiced in Nizams Hyderabad state takes the cake-sorry the bakery! While this area was liberated from the rule of the Nizam by the Indian Army, the people are yet to be liberated from this scourge.

An encounter with Bhanamathi is nothing new. In fact, about two decades back, a special committee had been appointed by the Karnataka Legislative Assembly to probe this under the leadership of Dr H Narasimhaiah. This committee had come to the conclusion that it was a non-existent entity! A number of

unconnected events had been all ascribed to this.

In 1996 I had the opportunity to visit the districts of Hyderabad Karnataka-Gulbarga, Bidar, Raichur and investigate this. My first visit was to Bidar where I was to deliver a lecture demonstration at a local college. The chief guest was the Superintendent of Police of that district, Mr Sanjay Bir Singh. He was insistent that I conduct a programme for the police-he informed me that, his force was deeply into superstitions and sometimes, he said policemen used to disappear for months and then join for duty-the excuse was-somebody had done Bhanamathi. That afternoon, a programme was duly conducted. When it came to the question-

answer session, one policeman asked me how I managed to acquire miraculous powers. When I told him that I had no such powers, his reply was that it was the hallmark of all people who had them-to claim that they do not have any such! Despite my denials I had miraculous, supernatural powers thrust upon me!

During this very same visit, I had delivered a lecture demonstration at a Bhanamathi affected village. When it was over, one villager informed me that Bhanamathi was happening in his house. It was that a teenaged girl was lying on a sapling which was only an inch thick; a heap of saris was burning etc. When I asked him to take me to his house where I could check it out, he was taken aback. He had never expected me to react that way. But, he wanted a way out. He told me that people who were belonging to Rakshasa Gana could see it. Since he knew that I was one born under Deva Gana I would not be able to see that!

Such was my experience each and every time. Another time when I had visited that area, there was the incidence of rape, hair cut, assault and nude parading of a lady nurse who was working in nearby village. The vested interests of the village alleged that she was a witch practicing Bhanamathi and all this was done to nullify her alleged magical powers. When proper investigations were done, it emerged that this lady had resisted the amorous advances of some of the high and mighty of the village who had branded her as a witch to

“teach her a lesson”.

In these areas where Bhanamathi is said to be rampant every mishap is ascribed to Bhanamathi-whether a physical illness, mental or anything happening to animals. Some people also believed that they could gain many powers by following prescribed rituals which include bizarre things like consuming one’s own excreta and ritualistic sacrifices.

In the first week of July, we had an advanced training camp for activists of our anti-superstition campaign, for those who had been already trained by us. Last year, we had training camps for activists who wanted to educate people about Bhanamathi and its evils. These activists

pharmacist of the primary health centre. Since it had no doctor or nurse, he was the sole representative of the medical services of the administration. He narrated a long story about how he, his brother and sister were affected by Bhanamathi for two decades. That he was a Muslim made no difference to this supposedly Hindu superstition. The strange thing was that though the perpetrators and victims of Bhanamathi were predominantly Hindus, those who would exorcise the spells were mainly Hindus.

After this story ended, another local person a shopkeeper showed his swollen legs and oedematous face and claimed it was also due to Bhanamathi. When further

of the village to meet those who had to be visited in houses for various reasons-the first visit was to the house of the young man who had invited us to the village-he was a dalith but popularly called as Shastri. His problem was that his sister-in-law was getting stigmata locally known as *kera*. There were black scars in the shape of crosses all over the body, mainly on limbs-but none on the face or back. It was quite obvious that they were self-inflicted. At that juncture the local MLA B.R. Patil arrived and joined our team. The lady was willing to be photographed and on that pretext we called her out. When she was out, our team member searched her belongings and found about a dozen



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were trained to do a number of apparently miraculous things like producing objects from thin air, swallowing fire, walking on fire etc. They would demonstrate these to the public and explain to them that they were not miracles and any one could perform them.

I had been to Gulbarga a week before, so that I could visit villages and speak to those affected by Bhanamathi.

The first village we went to was called Devantagi about 40 kms from Gulbarga. A small crowd had gathered at a meeting hall as the announcement had been made that people affected by Bhanamathi could tell us about their problems. The first one to narrate his tale of woe was the

questioned it turned out that he was a hypertensive not taking his medication properly. The next was a farmer and his son who had epilepsy. Though the boy was symptom free under medical treatment the father wanted to get the root cause treated. Bhanamathi! He was followed by a native of the village who had been married to a nearby villager. Her problem was that of a mentally challenged daughter-again the cause was said to be the same. In fact none of them had the courage to utter the word Bhanamathi –they use the Kannada word for the black magic done-*madisyara* as they were too scared to utter the word Bhanamathi!

In the afternoon, we went on a round

black date sized seeds called Kera Kai. They were used to make a home brewed remedy for coughs and contain a black corrosive liquid. With them, a needle was also found with traces of the resin on it. Our hunch was proved. Now, it was to establish the reason of this hysterical behavior. On persistent question the truth was out-her husband was a drunkard, a gambler and this attention seeking behavior was a reaction to his misdeeds. This was something which could not be discussed in public, so she was advised counseling.

The next house was that of a quadriplegic whose husband was so poor that he could not afford to take her to

hospital for medical aid. In the neighborhood a Muslim suffering from leucoderma ascribed his skin disease to the usual madisyara. A few others complained that on waking up in the morning, they had on their doorsteps, the typical sign of madisyara-lemons smeared with turmeric and vermilion! It was obvious that the whole village was obsessed with black magic. It was a potent mix of illiteracy, poverty and lack of medical facilities that had caused this and this village was a typical example of hundreds of its kind in the Bhanamathi affected districts of Hyderabad Karnataka-Bidar, Gulbarga, Raichur, Bellary and Koppala.

After our rounds we had a lecture demonstration to educate the people as how Bhanamathi like things could be done. They were also told about the need for medical treatment, the local member of the legislative assembly also promised to do his bit to improve the situation. It helped because he too was a rationalist willing to work for change. When the programme was to be over one of the members of the audience, a middle aged woman started getting symptoms of "possession." She jumped on one of our activists and clung to his neck. But, he managed to extricate himself. We told the villagers to refer her to a psychiatrist.

Our next visit was to a village called Khajuri. It was here that a young girl was kidnapped flayed and her beheaded body thrown in a field. Her parents were inconsolable. They feared for the life of their son and had taken out their eldest daughter from her school so that he could be looked after. Both of them being landless labourers, had to work from dawn to dusk to scratch out a bare subsistence living. The assembled villagers informed us that a gang of Bhanamathi perpetrators had carried out this gory ritual in search of hidden treasure. Though they were arrested, were out on bail and one of them who was residing in the village had run away. The empty house stood as a mute witness to the gory rituals in the name of Bhanamathi.

It is very clear that for this evil to be

A miracle man exposed

Hanumantha Mutya, a budding miracle man of a village called Sagari near Gulbarga was exposed by our troupe. During my stay at Gulbarga, a resident of a village nearby called Hanumantha Mutya (Mutya means miracle man in Gulbarga Kannada) had received wide publicity.



One TV channel had credited various miracle powers to him. Powdered turmeric which was given as Prasad by him was supposed to be a panacea for all diseases including barrenness. A number of cures and issues for barren couples were ascribed to the miraculous powers of this turmeric.

When the local journalists asked me to investigate him, I made an appeal for police protection as such investigations would be resented by locals who stand to gain by such. Since there was no response, a group of our activists decided to investigate him in my absence. When they reached the village, my hunch was proved right. They saw groups of villagers discussing my press statement and promising me a hot reception if I happened to go there!

They found a crowd of several hundred there. They were not the local innocent, uneducated villagers but the educated infotech, biotech and middle class crowd who had come from places as far away as Bangalore. All were anxiously waiting for the miracle man who was missing. Finally, our investigators managed to waylay him on his visit to a nearby field for his toilet! They found an innocent villager with no pretensions of any miraculous powers. He had absolutely no standing among his village compatriots who held him in no awe!

Further investigations showed that the whole village was an illegal settlement and some local vested interests had projected this village bumpkin as a miracle monger. They were also deriving monetary benefits by promising interviews for anxious devotees. It also turned out that those who had come in search of him were all outsiders taken in by the publicity of the media.

Our team returned after having their photograph taken with him. It was an opportune moment for our team that the miracle man had no indoor toilet and could be met on his way to perform excretory functions in open air! It is also the tragedy of a superstition besotted nation that even so called educated people go in search of non-existent miracles and perfectly ordinary miracle men!

eradiated concerted action from the various authorities is needed. The police should take action and book criminal cases which they are very reluctant to do as of now. The revenue and health authorities also need to do their bit. Our activists are planning a campaign to educate people that all the so-called super-natural events in the name of Bhanamathi are only man-made. Perhaps, such efforts for a decade or so may help to end this.

It is a tragedy that something that

could be called as Bahana mathi (entertainment in Urdu) could end up as an evil practice covering a variety of disorders-mental, physical and social. The Karnataka Rajya Vigyana Parishat has formed a committee under the chairmanship of Sri BS Soppin, for eradication of this. ■

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