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• Meera Nanda on
  Why She Criticizes Hinduism

• Women, Islam and Human Rights

• Exposing an ‘Electoral’ Hoax –
  “Section 49-O” of the Constitution of India!
The Islamist terror attacks in Mumbai on 26 November yet again brought to the attention of the whole world the gruesome reality of religious fanaticism. Indoctrinated in their ‘sacred’ rubbish, the religious bigots create a hell in this world. Intolerant of ‘others’ and other systems of beliefs, fanatic groups are devoid of any human morality and compassion. We witnessed it in Punjab in the early 1980s when fundamentalist Khalistanis had a hold over the Sikhs. We saw it in Delhi when thousands of innocent Sikhs were massacred after the assassination of Indira Gandhi. We saw it in Gujarat when Muslims were butchered by the Hindutwa terrorists after the Godhra train accident. We have witnessed the barbaric face of Islamist fanaticism on scores of occasions – Mumbai terror attack on 26/11 being the last. To create a more humane world, along with socio-economic measures, we should unleash ceaselessly ideological offensive against every kind of religious dogma.

With this issue we have completed one year of our publication. The response from our readers has so far been encouraging - especially when we came under the attack of certain ‘giants’! While we are happy to receive such a moral support, we expect more from our readers by way of articles for our magazine - articles promoting skepticism, humanism, rationalism, and secularism. We believe that a reader is not just a receptacle of someone else’ ideas and opinions. Every reader is constantly engaged in a conversation with the world around them. Every reader has something to say. We hence believe that a reader also should be a writer. Please send us your contributions to our email address.

Another way to help us is by forwarding our magazine to other likeminded individuals. You may also send us their email addresses so that we can send the ezine to them in future.

- manoj
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Why I Criticize Hinduism

Meera Nanda

Like other Indian rationalists, I have often been chided by fellow Indians - fairly mainstream, middle-class bhadralok, most of them — for picking on Hinduism. I am asked if I am so concerned about irrationalities and pseudo-sciences, why don’t I take on Islam and Christianity? Aren’t they full of faith-based nonsense? Hinduism, my critics tell me, is far more rational and “scientific” than these other “Semitic” religions in which you have to take the revelation purely on faith, no questions asked. I am often told rather gleefully that all my labors are wasted because they I am not aiming my rationalism against Christians and Muslims. Some go even further and assume that because I am critical of Hinduism, I must be a secret Christian, and I must be working for “the proselytizers”! Apparently, no one born a Hindu can legitimately raise questions about the “Eternal Truths” of the faith.

I’m presently working on a book manuscript in which I defend the old Nehruvian imperative of cultivating “scientific temper.” (I call this book Tryst with Destiny: Scientific Temper and Secularization of India. The book is very nearly done, and if all goes well, it should appear in print by mid-2009.)

I copy below a section titled “Three Caveats” from the introduction to the book. Here I anticipate the kind of criticism that I know will be heaped upon me, and try to meet the critics head-on. Here is what I say:

Three Caveats

Three caveats must be noticed about the style, intentions and the scope of this book.

The first caveat has to do with the fact that this book deals only with the conflicts between modern science and Hinduism. It does not examine the many flagrant irrationalities and fanaticisms that exist in Islam and Christianity, to say nothing of the many folk expressions of Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism. This exclusive focus on Hinduism is a result of many factors.

First, and most obviously, Hinduism is the religion of the majority; close to 85 percent of Indians describe themselves as Hindus. Secondly, it is a matter of historical fact that the proponents of scientific rationalism in India in the 20th century, whose ideas are explored at length here, came from a Hindu background and were engaged with issues relating to the Hindu metaphysical
justifications for caste and gender inequalities. Thirdly, Hinduism has avoided a serious house-cleaning by drawing far-fetched and ad hoc analogies with modern science. It has succeeded in selling itself around the world as the only and the ultimate “religion of reason,” while redefining reason itself to conform to the Hindu ideal of spiritual or Gnostic knowledge. Finally, I must acknowledge my own background. My own atheism emerged out of a critical back-and-forth with Hinduism, the faith I was born into, and the faith I took quite earnestly when I was younger. Among all the religions of India, it is the popular Hinduism of Ramayana, Bhagvat Gita and the Puranas that I have a fair amount of first-hand experience of. As an atheist of Hindu origin, and as a secularist concerned with the growth of Hindu nationalist politics, I take a rational critique of Hinduism to be a matter of great urgency.

It is for these reasons that this book is focused on the record of secularization and rationalization - mostly the lack of it - of Hinduism. But this Hindu-centrism should not be read as a back-handed approval of, or partiality for, any other religion. No religious faith is free from highly improbable and objectively false beliefs about matters of empirically verifiable facts. Indian Christians are as fond of their miracles and faith-healing as the devout Hindus who lined up to offer milk to the milk-drinking idols of Ganesha; Indian Muslims can be as literalist in the matter of Koran and Sharia as any Christian fundamentalist anywhere in the world. The principles of scientific rationality cut across all faith traditions and all conceptions of the supernatural, personal or impersonal, one or many, transcendent or immanent. Science is an equal-opportunity debunker, or a broad-spectrum weed-killer, if you will.

But let us weed our own gardens, I say, for those are the gardens and the weeds that we are most familiar with. Even though I have no desire whatsoever to step back into the Hindu garden of my childhood and youth, I insist on weeding it nevertheless, so that others who come after me can live in it (if they still choose to) without losing their minds and their consciences.
The second caveat has to do with the place of religion in social life. This book’s plea for combating superstitions and pseudoscience should not be read as a militant rejection of religion per se, even though all religions, without exception, have served as incubators of irrational beliefs. The idea is rather to set limits on what functions religions can legitimately perform in the 21st century. Applying critical inquiry to religious doctrines means only this: Insofar as religions invoke supernatural forces (whether a personal God or the impersonal but conscious shakti, or spiritual energy) in order to make factual claims about the natural world, they have an obligation to meet the same standards of evidence that apply to scientific explanations in the relevant domain of the natural world. In other words, if religions want to assert factual truths about the universe, or if they want to convince us of the actual existence of the beings and powers they claim exist in the universe, they cannot fall back upon the authority of ancient books or mystical “seers” gifted with divine powers to see what is not perceptible to ordinary mortals. If and when religions step into the turf of natural science and social sciences (including of course, history and archeology) which deal with empirically testable matters, they have to play by the rules of accepted science and adjust their picture of the world accordingly.

But as long as religions refrain from stepping into the turf of science, and learn to interpret the supernatural powers and phenomena as myths, allegories and poetic metaphors, they need not worry about scientific demonstrability, for scientific validity is not the correct criterion for measuring the value of poetry. Religion as hope-renewing poetry, myth or parable has — and perhaps will always have - an important place in the modern world. But religion will have to cede the function of explaining the natural and social world to science.

For many reasons having to do with Hindu theology and India’s entanglement in European romantic counter-Enlightenment, this separation between expressive and explanatory functions of religion has been particularly slow in coming in India. Contemporary Hinduism makes a number of factual claims about the cosmological order. A brief list of such claims will include the following: that the entire universe is filled with conscious spiritual energy that animates everything; that a soul capable of conscious awareness

Hindu philosophers - Keshub Chandra, Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo (from left to right) - have interpreted Vishnu’s ten avatars as foreshadowing the Darwinian theory of evolution
and memories can exist apart from the brain and the body; that this soul enters the embryo of a species chosen as a result of the souls’ karmic account from the previous birth; that different species of living beings represent different stages of the evolution of the soul; that morally good or bad deeds (punya or papa) from past births influence the innate qualities, gunas or “substance code” of different species, castes and genders that the soul is born into; the macrocosm (planets and stars) corresponds to and influences the microcosm (human affairs) and so on. Whatever else they are, all of them are simultaneously claims about the nature of the material world of particles, bodies, birth and evolution.

idea of the presence of consciousness in nature as an actual component (called “involution”) of the process of biological evolution. Rather than provide metaphorical interpretation of the spiritual teachings, neo-Hindu “reformists” have gone out of their way to defend them as if they are condoned by modern science. It is this abuse of modern science to prop up the outdated and objectively false assumptions about this world that is the target of this book.

The final caveat has to do with the use of the word “superstition.” This book will use the label “superstition,” when warranted, to describe irrational practices that have

Foreshadowing Darwinian theory of evolution!? - Dasavataram - a 19th century painting

Because these claims involve the material world, they are open to serious empirical inquiry using the standard methods of modern biology, physics, cosmology and neurobiology of consciousness. All of these claims need to be critically assessed based upon advances in scientific knowledge in these domains.

But rather than open its cosmological claims to critical scrutiny - and reject the many falsified elements — modern Hinduism has adopted the strategy of co-opting the vocabulary of modern science to legitimate its spirit-centered worldview. To take just one example, important Hindu philosophers, from Keshub Chandra, Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo have interpreted Vishnu’s ten avatars as foreshadowing the Darwinian theory of evolution and have interpreted the Hindu doctrinal support from religious texts. This term has fallen out of academic favor because it has come to reek of totalitarian persecution of religious believers, Soviet or Chinese style. Calling someone’s belief or practice “superstitious” is seen as tantamount to labeling that group deficient in the ability to reason and imposing your own standards of rationality on them: I have personally encountered many otherwise liberal and progressive intellectuals who take umbrage at me referring to elements of popular Hinduism as superstitions. Critics also point to the utter futility of it all. Don’t modern societies create their own superstitions? Isn’t it true that societies at the pinnacle of enlightened modernity - not just the US but the more secularized Western Europe as well - remain rife with old and New Age superstitions?
There are good reasons why pseudoscience and superstitions will always be with us for, to quote Carl Sagan:

[Superstitions] speak to powerful emotional needs that science often leaves unfulfilled. It caters to fantasies about personal powers we lack. It offers satisfaction of spiritual hungers, cures for disease, promises that death is not the end. It assures us that ..we are hooked up and tied to the Universe (Sagan, 1995: 14).

But persistence of superstition should be no reason to throw in the towel. On the contrary, persistent fallacies demand equally persistent critique. Indeed, those who rightly object to political persecution of groups marked “superstitious” (the persecution of Falun Gong in China, for example) should welcome open debate and demand for evidence, because debate is the best guarantor of an open society.

What is not acceptable is to sweep superstitions under the rug out of political correctness, for these will come back to haunt us. After all, what is a superstition? In the immortal words of Robert Ingersoll, one of America’s best known agnostics:

'Superstitions speak to powerful emotional needs that science often leaves unfulfilled. It caters to fantasies about personal powers we lack. It offers satisfaction of spiritual hungers, cures for disease, promises that death is not the end. It assures us that ..we are hooked up and tied to the Universe" - Carl Sagan

Superstition is:

- To believe in spite of evidence or without evidence.
- To account for one mystery by another.
- To believe that the world is governed by chance or caprice.
- To disregard the true relation between cause and effect.

- To put thought, intention and design back of nature.
- To believe that mind created and controls matter.
- To believe in force apart from substance, or in substance apart from force.
- To believe in miracles, spells and charms, in dreams and prophecies.
- To believe in the supernatural.

The foundation of superstition is ignorance, the superstructure is faith and the dome is a vain hope. Superstition is the child of ignorance and the mother of misery. (Ingersoll, 1898, emphasis added).

Regardless of the content of the superstition (whether it has to do with astrology and crystals or “higher” more “subtle” readings of quantum physics), what is troubling about superstitions is how these beliefs are arrived at. What is troubling is the tendency to “believe in spite of [falsifying] evidence or without [affirming or positive] evidence,” to “disregard the true relationship between cause and effect,” and to “put thought intention and design back in nature."

These styles of thinking are always unwholesome and sometimes downright dangerous. Individually and by themselves, they appear to cause no long-lasting harm, apart from the fact that they most often lead to false conclusions. After all, how does it matter if people read their horoscopes, if it brings them some hope in this chaotic and unpredictable world? The same logic applies to belief in miracles and the power of prayers to bring them about: people need consolation and hope.
Ridding the world completely of all irrationalities is a quixotic task, indeed. As long as long as they cause no real harm, one can learn to live with irrationalities of one's fellow citizens. But more often than not, superstitions do real harm. To begin with, they exact a cost from the poorest and the most helpless members of the society who end up wasting scarce resources on charlatans and holy frauds. But what makes superstitious thinking dangerous for the society in the long term is that it cultivates a habit of believing without adequate evidence, of accepting ideas on faith alone. This paves the way for false prophets and dictators.

It is for this reason that secular democracies must learn to balance the freedom of belief with an obligation to constantly push against irrationally held beliefs with demands for evidence that can be systematically tested. There is simply no other option

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Hindus worship lots of gods. That's a violation of God's commandments. There won't be any Hindus in Heaven, since their religion is FALSE!

Buddhists worship Buddha. And he was just a man. It's wrong to call a man "God." There won't be any Buddhists in Heaven, since their religion is FALSE!

Moslems believe Mohammed, who was a FALSE prophet. There won't be any Moslems in Heaven, since their religion is FALSE!

Wait a second! First, how is it LESS VALID to believe in 100 gods than in one god? Second, Buddhists don't worship Buddha or claim he was a god. In fact, it's Christians who claim a man is a god! And finally, how are the claims of Mohammed any less FAR-FETCHED or less supported than Bible claims? Why believe one story and not the other? You HYPOCRITICALLY accept your religious suppositions, that are no more VERIFIABLE than the ones you reject!

Don't you know it's RUDE and OFFENSIVE to QUESTION or DISCOUNT someone's SACREDLY HELD BELIEFS?!
Exposing an ‘Electoral’ Hoax - “Section 49-O” of the Constitution of India!

T V Manoj
(With inputs from Somu Rao, Goa Science Forum)

One of the most nauseating scenes India has witnessed after the horrific Mumbai terror attack on November 26 was the parade of India’s supposedly apolitical class in front of every other 24 x 7 television channels airing their illiterate opinions on politics and governance. Some wanted the country to ‘nuke’ Pakistan. Some others wanted presidents’ rule – American style! Yet another group wanted to abolish politics in the country altogether and the army to rule the country! They paraded as if - as N.Ram, editor-in-chief of The Hindu group of publications said in a lecture given at a meeting organized recently by Samudaya, a progressive theatre group based in Bangalore, - these reactionary forces would govern the country with their placards!

There is another group of people who are not depoliticized or apolitical, but nevertheless got fed up with the lumpen and criminalized politics we have often experienced in this country for decades. Feeling powerless to do anything and desperate, they get hold of any straw – real or imaginary – that gives them some kind of a consolation. An email message that has got a new lease of life and is being passed around since the Mumbai terror attack is a clear example of this phenomenon.

I reproduce below the email message Bangalore Skeptic received recently from one reliable contact. Since he is not the author of the message, I leave out the name of the individual. Here is the message:

Hi All…….

I Vote Nobody!!!!!!!!

Did you know that there is a system in our constitution, as per the 1969 act, in section “49-O” that a person can go to the polling booth, confirm his identity, get his finger marked and convey the presiding election officer that he doesn’t want to vote anyone!

Yes such a feature is available, but obviously these seemingly notorious leaders have never disclosed it. This is called “49-O”.

Why should you go and say "I VOTE NOBODY"... because, in a ward, if a candidate wins, say by 123 votes, and that particular ward has received "49-O" votes more than 123, then that polling will be cancelled and will have to be re-poll. Not only that, but the candidature of the contestants will be removed and they cannot contest the re-polling, since people had already expressed their decision on them. This would bring fear into parties and hence look for genuine candidates for their parties for election. This would change the way; of our whole political system... it is seemingly surprising why the election commission has not revealed such a feature to the public....

Please spread this news to as many as you know... Seems to be a wonderful weapon against corrupt parties in India ... show your power, expressing your desire not to vote for anybody, is even more powerful
than voting... so don't miss your chance. So either vote, or vote not to vote (vote 49-O) and pass this info on...

Use your voting right for a better INDIA.

Please forward this to all the friends and let them know!!!

Isn’t a wonderful instrument to punish our untrustworthy politicians? Hold your answer! Such a section does not exist in our Constitution!

First, The Constitution of India does not have “Sections”, but it has Preamble, Parts, Articles, Chapters, Schedules, and Appendices. In the Constitution, there is an Article 49 (nothing called “49-O”), which has nothing at all to do with elections. The Article 49 of the Constitution is about “Protection of monuments and places and objects of national importance”, which is reproduced below:

49. It shall be the obligation of the State to protect every monument or place or object of artistic or historic interest, [declared by or under law made by Parliament] to be of national importance, from spoliation, disfigurement, destruction, removal, disposal or export, as the case may be.

Where, then, is this “49-O”? Though the Constitution of India does not have a “Section 49-O”, The Conduct of Election Rules – 1961 has a rule 49-O under Part IV (Voting in Parliamentary and Assembly Constituencies). The relevant rule is reproduced below:

49-O. Elector deciding not to vote.-If an elector, after his electoral roll number has been duly entered in the register of voters in Form-17A and has put his signature or thumb impression thereon as required under sub-rule (1) of rule 49L, decided not to record his vote, a remark to this effect shall be made against the said entry in Form 17A by the presiding officer and the signature or thumb impression of the elector shall be obtained against such remark.

(The entire text of The Conduct of Election Rules – 1961 can be found at: http://lawmin.nic.in/ld/subord/cer1.htm)

Now compare this rule 49-O with what is claimed in the email message. As per the message,

1. If the number of electors who have decided not to vote is more than the winning margin of candidate in “a ward”, the election will be cancelled and a re-poll conducted.

2. In the re-poll, the candidates who have already contested and lost the election “will be removed and they cannot contest the re-polling, since people had already expressed their decision on them”!

Does the rule 49-O of The Conduct of Election Rules – 1961 say anything of those sorts? Not at all!

As Somu (Goa Science Forum) points out “many votes are cast for ‘none of the above’. Eventually the winner will be whoever among the existing candidates secures the most number of votes. One can use the 49-O option to make a statement but not to call for a re-election”.

Though I came across this message only very recently (post-Mumbai terror attack), Somu informs me that it has been doing the rounds for many years. A google search confirms that it is so. This email is a hoax perpetrated upon the unsuspecting public who generally do not take the pain to go through the entire Constitution and the Election Rules to verify for themselves the correctness of a claim made in a mail received from a reliable friend.

(Thanks to Somu Rao who enlightened me about this hoax in the nick of time.)
Women, Islam, and Human Rights

Dr Muhammad Younas Sheikh

*Part Three: The Muslim World Today*

Iran, basically an Islamic spiritual colony, is the godfather of the Shiite Islamic terrorism. Saudi unnis are an Islamic sect like the Christian Catholics while Shiites are like the Protestant Christians. This government in Iran is the most evil religious state today. Torture, murder and absolutism – an Islamic version of Hitler’s Nazism, Stalin’s Communism and Mussolini’s Fascism combined. Iran has used its oil money in the interests of Islamic revolutions all over the world, and continues to do so. There were 5,195 political and religious executions in 1983 alone! A few years ago a bill was presented in the Iranian parliament asking that, in according with the tradition of the prophet, marriage of girls should be allowed among children only nine years old!

Human rights are definitely not allowed to exist in Iran, where according to the English language Radio Iran, the Holy Spirit of Imam Khomeni hovers over the nation at all times. Women have been hanged on suspicion of sexual crimes. Even proved virgins have been sent to gallows, although they are hanged only after being Islamically raped, as Iranian Islam does not allow挂着 of virgins.

Along the coast of North Africa, Algeria, known for its Islamic civil war, continues with its horrors. Among the opposition, Islamic absolutism is imposed with guns and slaughter. Men are usually killed for their religio-political crimes while women are killed just for the crime of being a woman in an Islamic country. Thousands were raped and more than 500 were killed only in 1993. Women have been killed for not wearing the veil or refusing to do so when imposed, for refusing to engage in Iranian-style temporary marriage, for being married to foreign men, and for working and living alone. The victims have been as young as nine years and as old as 69 years. Women are often raped and tortured before being slaughtered. Thousands find themselves imprisoned in Islamic camps for no legitimate reasons. It is worth mentioning that women had a respectable status in society before the conquest of Algeria by Islam.

Egyptians, heir to the great Pharaonic and Alexandrian civilisations, continue to suffer the chronic evil of Islam. Known for the miseries of hijab and female genital mutilation, Egypt is also a centre of child prostitution for wealthy Saudis. In Egypt, four out of five women are forced to wear some kind of hijab. Female genital mutilation is very common; up to 73% in Cairo and 95% in rural areas. In 1995 a shaikh (religious dignitary) of Al-Azhar University in Cairo issued a fatwa (the religious decree or bull), which reportedly announced the procedure of female genital

*The first two parts of this essay were published in our Issue No. 1/11, November 2008*
mutilation as ‘laudable practice that does honour to women’; and stating that it was a religious duty as important as praying to Allah.

Sudan had a long history of Islamic conquest and repression. Islamic totalitarianism and barbarity continues to this day. Recently, Sudan was brutalised by the Saudi-backed General Numeri’s Islamic fascism. In 1992 a religious decree-fatwa was issued that gave justification to the military onslaught against the non-Muslims. Islamic barbarism and genocide continues in Darfur to this day.

Pakistan, an experimental laboratory of Islam, has turned into a horror. Notwithstanding the hundreds of thousands of rapes, abductions and murders during the partition, Pakistan has made no certain move towards civilisation, and continues to be a centre of Islamic fundamentalism, extremism and terrorism.

In Indonesia, the army mass-murdered 200,000 East Timorese non-Muslims before East Timor got its independence. The country is known for its extreme religiosity, corruption, ethno-religious problems and Islamic extremism.

Pakistan, an experimental laboratory of Islam, has turned into a horror. Notwithstanding the hundreds of thousands of rapes, abductions and murders during the partition, Pakistan has made no certain move towards civilisation, and continues to be a centre of Islamic fundamentalism, extremism and terrorism.

Pakistan’s very Islamic army invaded her province of East Pakistan in 1971, killing hundreds of thousands of Bengali Muslims and non-Muslims and raping half a million women in its attempt to create a half breed Pak-Bengal race which would be loyal to Islam and Pakistan. In 1974 the Pakistani army invaded its province of Baluchistan resulting in similar calamities. In 1980 General Zia ul Haq introduced further Islamisation under the Saudi pressure for introduction of the medieval and tribal Islamic Shariah. Along with compulsory public prayers, there were brutal Islamic laws against natural sexual acts and for the presumed blasphemy: the repressive Hudood Ordinance and the infamous Blasphemy laws. Thousands of innocent women continue to suffer under these and other Islamic fascist laws for mere allegations. Raped women had been sent to gallows for the crime of being raped. Islamic Shariah is the only system of law which punishes the victims. The Pakistani state has proved to be a willing and sinister instrument of the evil Islamic mullah fascism and terrorism.

Pakistan helped create the hated Afghan Taliban and many other such organisations in Afghanistan. Similar organisations continue to flourish in Pakistan and try to create a totalitarian and fascist Islamic state. Despite all tall claims of fight against the Islamic terrorism, the evil continues to flourish. Pakistan is undoubtedly a major source of supply for the Iraqi terrorism. Illicit drug trade continues with the blessings of the mullahs and the ISI (the Islamic Military Intelligence). There are Islamic prostitution centres in every city of Pakistan where abducted and non-Muslims women are forced to suffer the attentions of very religious Muslims. The secular, liberal and rationalist intellectuals continue to suffer in Pakistan, like the victims of the infamous Christian Inquisition of medieval Europe. While the Christian churches burnt the heretics, Islamic mullahs get them indicted for blasphemy and get them locked in the death cells. Eternal vigilance is the price of civilisation.
Part Four: Islam and Democracy

While Muslim women are oppressed by superstition, ignorance, lack of human rights, female genital mutilations, and forced seclusion; religious extremism, fundamentalism, suicide-bombing and Islamic terrorism continue to be the hallmarks of the Muslim states and societies. It is high time for the civilized world to wake-up from the stupor of multi-culturalism and blind tolerance of the organised intolerance; for the disease is spilling herein already.

Many of the acts of the Islamic states and societies, organisations and individuals are barbaric and medieval; the beheading of the innocent hostages, death penalties and murders for religious reasons; chopping of hands and feet; stoning to death of women for being the victim of rape; honour-killing on mere suspicion, suicide-bombings and acts of terrorism; these are indicative of a deep-seated disease. Murder in the name of a merciful Allah is mere hypocrisy.

The rise of Saudi-sponsored extremist Islam is a danger to civilization everywhere. All extremist Muslims are potential terrorists and Allah’s soldiers. There should be no tolerance for this religiously organised intolerance against liberalism, human rights and women’s equal status and other manifestations of our civilisation. Muslims in civilized and democratic societies should be required to take the oath of loyalty to the state and democracy. The political right to vote to those whose political loyalties are located in some far off desert is not only harmful but suicidal for the state as well as for the very system of democracy.

Can we have political rights to vote for those who wish to destroy the very system of democracy? Think again, ladies and gentlemen. There is no place for optimism for a liberal Islam. Nearly all Islamic states and states have failed to appreciate the basic human rights of their people, their women and their minorities. Saudis and Emirates are the worst offenders; and are the financial godfathers of fundamentalism, extremism and Islamic backwardness everywhere. Nearly all Islamic states and societies are dangerous, not only for itself but for the world as a whole. Pakistan, for example, after supplying Iran and North Korea with nuclear secrets, continues to offer dangerous technology. Vietnam and Brazil are the new customers. The nuke-

There should be no tolerance for any religiously organised intolerance against liberalism, human rights and women’s equal status and other manifestations of our civilisation.

terrorist Dr. Abdul Qadir Kahn is safe, well protected and facilitated by the State of Pakistan, with full impunity, of course.

You civilised people! Yesterday you refused to acknowledge the dangers inherent in the rise of the Nazi and Communist ideologies. Yesterday you supported Islamic Taliban even when they trampled rights of their women under their feet. Your refusal to confront militant Islam today may cost us more dearly than our individual lives-our cherished achievement – our civilisation.

Beliefs have consequences; the centrality of Islam to mental, social, intellectual and cultural backwardness; organised offences against women and minorities; fundamentalism, extremism and modern terrorism are impossible to deny. ‘Religions of peace and tolerance’ are mere empty words. Islam is an organised crime against humanity!
**Postscript: a note from the author**

It is necessary to outline some issues raised by this article. I am no stranger to Pakistan and vice versa. Therefore I request all the Pakistani and Muslim readers to be careful in communication of whole or parts of this article.

Well now, if the religions, the claimants of morality, behave in such immoral, unethical and political ways, then where do we, the ordinary mortals, find answers to our intellectual, educational, cultural, emotional, spiritual and psychological questions? We have families and friends, claims of individuals to prophet-hood? What is the aim of life? Is there a life after death? What are the heavens and the hells? How should we live and behave normally? What about unjust laws by the repressive sates? What is the political process? Which political party should we vote for and why? Why democracy and why not democracy? What about colonialism and imperialism? What right had the Islamic terrorists of killing thousands of innocent US citizens in their suicidal attacks? And what rights do the USA and Britain have for attacking Afghanistan and Iraq? How to deal with inheritance, dowry, divorce etc. etc.

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**It is true that prophet of Islam raised his voice against the tribal warfare and the female infanticide in his time. We have new problems of our own age, problems which demand new solutions. The old principles do not work in the new atmosphere.**

states and societies, traditions and taboos, organised religions and not-so organised superstitions. Everybody has the right to expectations and guidance. Who will guide us, differentiating right from wrong, ethical from unethical, and good from bad? How should we educate our children? There is the organised terrorism of mullahs and priests; there is the police and bureaucracy; how should we deal with them? We have material needs as well as psychological and spiritual needs; how we satisfy these then? What about our sexual behaviours? We have young men full of nature-given sexual reflexes and appetites. Their eyes most naturally fall on the women; some of them our daughters and sisters. What freedoms are we to allow to the women and men, before or after marriage? What is the definition of marriage and how to deal with it?

There are the philosophical questions as well. For example: who created the whole universe? Who created the God or Allah? How trustworthy are uncorroborated Questions galore! The Buddha invested his youth, his kingdom and his whole life before he found some enlightenment into few dimensions of life of his age; however, when he found the answers, the questions had changed! The whole social atmosphere had changed! It is true that prophet of Islam raised his voice against the tribal warfare and the female infanticide in his time. We have new problems of our own age, problems which demand new solutions. The old principles do not work in the new atmosphere. The rules to drive camels do not work with aeroplanes! Our age has its own problems in the background of its peculiar cultural, political, moral, religious and technological background. These problems require new solutions.

Gone are the days of prophets, it is the age of rational human beings who would like to think reasonably about every value. They would like to discuss things and find out solutions for themselves. There will be no new prophets; humans therefore must learn to think and evolve their own truths,
formulate their own systems. Humans are the subjects as well as the objects of all our thoughts: for the old Gods exist no more. ‘Man is the measure of all things,’ declared Protagoras.

The world consciousness started as a human phenomenon and it continues to be a human phenomenon. Yes, it is called humanism. It is today’s philosophy as it was in the ancient Greeks 4000 years ago. Yes, I am a humanist. And yes, I would like to discuss these problems with you, provided we interact. Life is too extensive and human life is too short. It is not possible for anybody to know everything. ‘And above every knowing one, there is another knowing one.’ Let’s continue this discussion on a mutual way, in the greater interest of civilisation, please!

Dr. Younus Shaikh is a Pakistani medical doctor, human rights activist, rationalist and free-thinker. In October 2000, following a lecture, he was charged with blasphemy and ultimately after 11 months in jail sentenced to death. The verdict was later turned over in November 2003, after some further years in jail, following a high degree of international campaign. (This article is reproduced from The Open Society, Journal of the New Zealand Association of Rationalists and Humanists - Volume 78, Number 3, Spring 2005. The first part of this essay was carried in our November 2008 issue)

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Everywhere… religious or philosophical idealism (the one being simply the more or less free interpretation of the other) serves today as the banner of bloody and brutal material force, of shameless material exploitation.

- Michael Bakunin -
Remember the road you are walking is not a bed of Roses, there are also thorns on the way and on your lifes mission of promoting Scientific Temper you will encounter not only thorns but 'Giant' obstacles. Accept it as a part of life.

Anyway, congratulation for publishing the excellent BS issues. Keep going.

Somu Rao (Goa Science Forum)

**

I’m very glad to make your acquaintance. And thanks very much for Bangalore Skeptic. I’m thrilled to see such a quality production which is politically progressive at the same time. My problem with Indian rationalists used to be that they kept themselves busy exposing frauds and godmen without making connections with the political life of the society around them (part of the blame goes to progressive political groups/movements as well for they have not bothered to sufficiently criticize the reactionary role of religion in social life). So I was very happy to see your strong expression of solidarity with the Christians of Mangalore. I am glad to see rationalists take a stand against religious violence against any community.

Meera Nanda, US

**

I enjoy your magazine every week. I wanted to congratulate you on being mentioned on The Atheist Experience. It is actually one of the podcasts that I listen to every week.

Ajita Kamal (www.nirmukta.com)

**
Thank you. I am very happy to receive the magazine so regularly. I always read it soon after I receive as a priority. Please include me as a permanent receiver.

Dr Keshava Rao, Bangalore

**

I am interested in your e-zine and please continue sending the ezine regularly.

K.R. Aithal, Bangalore

**

I am not interested in receiving the ezine. Please stop sending the same in future.

Name withheld, Bangalore
(one of the recipients of the email we wrote about in our last issue)

**

I wish I too could answer the gentlemen who have taken pains to react to my letter. Since only favorable replies are solicited I see that conversation is closed.

Wish you well. Buddha also said 'develop Brahma viharas- of Metta, mudita, karuna and upekkha.

J. Sreenivasa Murthy, Bangalore

[We wrote to Prof Sreenivasa Murthy informing him that we would publish his reply. But there has been no response]
Bangalore Vicharavadi Sangha  
(Bangalore Rationalist Association)

Bangalore Vicharavadi Sangha conducts monthly lectures and discussions on various topics. Some of the well-known personalities who spoke at the association's meetings are: Narendra Nayak (President, Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations), V.T.Rajashekar (Editor, Dalit Voice), G.K.Govinda Rao (Author & Cine Actor), and Lalitha Naik (Ex-Minister)

Those who are interested in attending the programmes conducted by the association may contact:

Dr. M.N.Keshava Rao (Phone: 26690269. Email: keshava_rao@hotmail.com)  
A.S.Nataraj (Phone: 26696553. Email: rajsri@bgl.vsnl.net.in)
Tools for Skeptical Thinking

Carl Sagan

Carl Sagan's famous essay, *The Fine Art of Baloney Detection*, more or less encapsulates the basic tenets of Skeptical Thinking. The present article is an extract from the essay. The full text can be found in one of Sagan's best-sellers *The Demonhaunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*.

- Wherever possible there must be independent confirmation of the "facts."

- Encourage substantive debate on the evidence by knowledgeable proponents of all points of view.

- Arguments from authority carry little weight—"authorities" have made mistakes in the past. They will do so again in the future. Perhaps a better way to say it is that in science there are no authorities; at most, there are experts.

- Spin more than one hypothesis. If there's something to be explained, think of all the different ways in which it could be explained. Then think of tests by which you might systematically disprove each of the alternatives. What survives, the hypothesis that resists disproof in this Darwinian selection among "multiple working hypotheses," has a much better chance of being the right answer than if you had simply run with the first idea that caught your fancy.

- Quantify. If whatever it is you're explaining has some measure, some numerical quantity attached to it, you'll be much better able to discriminate among competing hypotheses. What is vague and qualitative is open to many explanations. Of course there are truths to be sought in the many qualitative issues we are obliged to confront, but finding them is more challenging.

- If there's a chain of argument, every link in the chain must work (including the premise) —not just most of them.

- Occam's Razor. This convenient rule-of-thumb urges us when faced with two hypotheses that explain the data equally well to choose the simpler.

- Always ask whether the hypothesis can be, at least in principle, falsified. Propositions that are untestable, unfalsifiable are not worth much. You must be able to check assertions out. Inveterate skeptics must be given the chance to follow your reasoning, to duplicate your experiments and see if they get the same result.
Believe nothing
Merely because you have been told it
Or because it is traditional
Or because you yourself have imagined it
Do not believe what your teacher tells you merely out of respect for the teacher
But whatever, after due examination and analysis
You find to be conducive to the good, the benefit,
The welfare of all beings that doctrine believe and cling to
and take it as your guide.

- Buddha