Bangalore SKEPTIC

No.9 September 2008

Abraham Kovoor (1898 - 1978)
Yet another highflying godman was in the news recently — once again for all the wrong reasons. On July 5, 2008 decomposed bodies of two boys were found on the banks of the river Sabarmati, near Asharam Bapu Gurukul in Motera, Gandhinagar in Gujarat. Their heads were tonsured. The boys’ parents allege that they were sacrificed by the ashram authorities as part of "black magic". After an unprecedented strike called by the people of Ahmedabad, Narendra Modi’s government has registered a case and 14 people were arrested from the ashram. How many frauds, rapes, deaths, and murders should take place before the devotees stop visiting the godmen and other ‘spiritual’ crooks? We have reproduced, on our “Documents” section, some of the reports that appeared in various newspapers and magazines on this issue.

From this issue onwards we will be publishing Atheist Eve, a philosophically inclined comic strip authored by Ms. Tracie Harris, a graphic designer from Austin, U.S. We express our gratitude to her for granting us permission to reproduce the comic strip.

In August we had a partial solar eclipse in India. As usual, a large number of our people - including some highly educated lots - decided to stay inside their homes during the period of eclipse and refused to have food until the eclipse got over! Instead of the traditional astrological terminologies used by their ancestors, our present day gullible couch their beliefs in modern “scientific” terminologies – gravity, emission of radiation, and what not! In the article, “Gullibility Unlimited”, Prof Narendra Nayak looks into the comic ways of our believers.

A new website, www.nirmukta.com, is being launched on 15 September 2008, with the proclaimed objective of “discussing events and ideas that concern the secularization movement in India”. We wish Mr Ajita Kamal, the man behind the venture, a great success.

- manoj
Contents

Gullibility Unlimited
Narendra Nayak

Atheist Eve
Tracie Harris

Fear of the Unknown
Somu

Nagapanchami: The Serpent’s Nightmare
T V Manoj

Abraham Kovoor: The militant debunker
T V Manoj

Murders in Asaram Bapu's Ashram
Documents

Tools for Skeptical Thinking
Carl Sagan

Believe Nothing ... ...
Buddha
Gullibility Unlimited

Narendra Nayak

Are we a nation of gullible people? The rhetorical question needs no answer. The month of August, 2008 was a period when gullibility ran riot. Thanks to a solar, lunar eclipse and the magical date of 08/08/08! Well first things first.

The month, opened with a solar eclipse on the very first day. This was partial over India, but seen in totality in many parts of the world. The minor nature of the eclipse did not prevent the doomsayers from having a field day. The degree of the eclipse was not important they said, but the very occurrence of the event would cause problems. The worst was that lunar eclipse was to follow within a fortnight. In the middle of these events would come the date 08/08/08. These events are the astrologer's dream come true! They could predict calamities for the whole world and worst for those whose as(s)trological signs would fall during that period. They predicted rashi dosha (fault with the zodiac sign), nakshatra dosha (fault with the birth star) for a good percentage of the population and warned them of the catastrophes that would befall them. However all was not lost there was redemption. That was of course, a pooja for the relevant gods and offerings to them. That could prevent the ill effects of the eclipses and also result in prosperity by turning the tables on those who
According to Hindu Mythology, Rahu, the demon, swallows the Sun-god during eclipse

findings. The claimed that scientist not our desi variety, but from the west had discovered that some rays are emitted during eclipses which have very evil effects on all living things. So, the wisdom of the ancients had been proved by unknown "scientists" who were unheard of in any scientific circles or their findings published in any responsible journals. Of course all that was due to a conspiracy of western science which wants to deny the due place to the wisdom of our ancients. The due wisdom of our ancients had accorded the center of the universe status to the earth and their infinite wisdom had grouped \textit{Rahu}, \textit{Ketu} (the eclipses), the sun (a star) and the moon (a satellite) all as planets and listed them as nava grahas - the nine planets.

The streets were deserted as all people preferred to stay indoors, all activities came to a stand still and we are told that many people stopped breathing the eclipse polluted air to prevent the contamination entering their bodies (of course the last part is only applicable to those who breathed their last during the eclipse). No food and water were consumed during that period, except by a few fool hardy souls like us including most of the members of the Mangalore Today team who ate heartily suspending their diets, exposing the food and drink (only fruit juice) to the deadly poisonous rays emitted by the sun. In addition all these activities were carried out standing in open air and directly exposing ourselves (only those parts not covered by clothes) to the deadly radiations emitted by the eclipsed sun. Despite of all these no ill effects were reported by any except for the editor of Mangalore Today and yours truly complaining about a burning sensation on the tops of their heads. But, as Mahesh Nayak remarked that was not due to the solar eclipse radiations but two other well known facts-the lack of hair on the outside and grey matter on the inside! The first is of course visible to all, but the second was a secret which we tried to hide from the public for long.

Any way, no ill effects have been reported by those who have partaken food and drink exposed to the deadly solar rays which emanate during eclipses only. In fact yours truly has been consuming solar exposed food after the total solar eclipse which he had observed in 1980. Of course the only catastrophe which had happened to him was that he got married that year and according to his better half the disaster had happened to her. The lighter aspects part, it is feared that pregnant women will either abort or deliver babies with congenital abnormalities if they go out during the eclipse. All food and water get contaminated and have to be thrown out. However, the same is not applicable to water in rivers, tanks or other
reservoirs. This is probably due to a critical mass of water being needed to avoid the effects of the radiations! Most threw out cooked food and started cooking only after the eclipse has passed. Here too the problem is only for cooked food. The uncooked is not affected. Again, for cooked food there is a way of decontamination too. If one puts a bit of a special grass called garike the contamination can be neutralized. That is what many claimed to do.

Places of worship, sorry only temples of the Hindus, did roaring business. Despite their adherence to all other sorts of superstitions, eclipses do not affect Christians and Muslims and hence there were no special prayers at their places of worship! There were pujas, yagas, yagnas going on every where each claiming that theirs was the one which would shield the country from the ill effects of the eclipse. Those whose birth stars were during the period of the eclipse had to perform special rituals to get rid of the evil influences and of course like all other things in this world, nothing comes free. The income was for those whose influences would cause these to vanish.

After the eclipse had passed people took a ritual bath to get rid of the pollution. But, what about the blood circulating in the cardio vascular system? Would that not be contaminated too? When the question was asked the experts on eclipse related problems get angry and reply that the washing of the body will get rid of all the contamination related to the event! Why not apply that to the kitchen and wash that instead of throwing away cooked food. Then follows the excuse that we follow what our ancestors did.

The same was applied to 08/08/08 I could see an eminent astrologer expounding at length on a TV channel about the years when all the 8s came and the world shaking events that happened during them. He however, conveniently said nothing on those years when these had not come and worst had happened. The Chinese on the other hand had no problems with these numbers. They considered them as lucky and an event like the opening ceremony of Olympics started at 8.08 Pm on the 8th August, 2008! So, we cannot claim a monopoly to gullibility. In fact it was reported that the maximum number of marriages took place on that day in China.
So, what is lucky for one group of superstitious people can be unlucky for another group equally or probably more gullible.

Now is the double jeopardy. The Lunar eclipse scheduled for the 16th August. It is like rubbing salt on the wounds. A solar eclipse is bad enough, but a lunar one following soon after would result in mayhem. It could be the last word on disasters. That is what we have been threatened with by the forecasters of doom. In the coming year there are going to be floods, earthquakes, wars, plagues and pestilences unlimited. The world may come to an end. Well if it does not. Then it will be due to the religious ceremonies performed which have caused the ill effects to be neutralized. That is astrology for you. Heads I win, tails you lose. Though it is claimed that what is put down in the horoscope cannot be changed even by gods, there are rituals which are more powerful that them. Following these strictly would ensure that these are totally neutralized or mitigated. For example if the evil influences wanted to take some ones life, the performance of appropriate rituals could result in them causing a minor accident to the threatened individual.

If this be not gullibility what can it be? That reminds of an anecdote of the eminent philosopher Bertrand Russel. That was about a drunken man who was caught by a policeman shouting at the top of his voice late night in Hyde park in London. When queried as to what he was doing the man remarked that he was shouting a magical incantation to drive away the wild elephants. When the policeman told him that he must be crazy to do that as the nearest wild elephant was thousands of miles away in Africa, he replied that that showed the efficacy of his ritual! So, are the claims of our astrologers.

Finally, one of guests of the solar eclipse party queried, whether there would a similar celebration for the lunar eclipse. The reaction was from another guest, that he would like to watch two eclipsed moons lying on his back after having fulfilled his spiritual longings. Since most of the guests present were very spiritual people, yours truly who has limited financial resources had to request them to look for some other host!

(All the images are taken from http://en.wikipedia.org/)

*Dimond Ring: A breath-taking view of a solar eclipse in Turkey*
Tracie Harris is a graphic designer in Austin, Texas, US. Raised in Orlando, Florida, she received her BA in Liberal Studies from the University of Central Florida. According to the website, http://www.atheist-community.org/, "her long, slow recovery from a rabid fundamentalist upbringing led her to the creation of Atheist Eve".

Tracie Harris has been publishing Atheist Eve since 1 October 2004 and all her earlier works are archived at: http://www.atheist-community.org/atheistev/ . Atheist Eve is reproduced by Bangalore Skeptic with the author’s permission.
Fear of the Unknown

Somu

Let’s first examine whether any person (such as godmen, faith healers, gunias, mantriks, ghadi, bhagats etc.) can really cure any illness with his so called supernatural powers or mantra shakti. Investigations done so far prove beyond doubt that no person on this planet can perform miracles, black magic or cure people from any sickness with mantra shakti. In fact rationalists have time and again challenged mantriks to prove their so called mantra shakti by using it on them (rationalists) and making them suffer. This challenge is yet to be accepted.

We must consciously try to remove the baseless fear from our minds that some people may possess the so-called 'miraculous powers' to cure us of illness or make us ill. We must stop watching television serials and movies, and stop reading novels and religious scriptures which promote these types of irrational beliefs and behaviours. When young children of an impressionable age are exposed to such literature and movies, it results in harmful conditioning of their minds and it will make them behave irrationally at a later stage in their life. Remember the ISRO scientists who took a replica of a satellite to Tirupathy for the god Balaji’s blessings before launching it. This may be the result of childhood conditioning with irrational thoughts.

It is also important to understand the reasons behind our tendency to believe in the so called power of Mantrics, Bhagats, Ghadi etc. One reason is that human beings have always held a fascination for the supernatural, imaginary, occult etc and the very idea that someone might have this power makes them happy. This belief is not only born out of illiteracy but also because of our ignorance about nature as well as the functions of our body (anatomy and physiology).

We say that we have made tremendous progress. Yes, we have progressed! But our claim of progress is restricted to constructing mega housing projects, moving around in big cars, etc. This car which is the gift of science and technology is used by people to visit swamis, bhagats, and mantrics to do rituals which are most unscientific in nature with his family. We have studied to become doctors, engineers and teachers but the question is have we become truly rational human beings. Hard to find! We have degrees in science, we claim to be scientific minded but when it comes to the so-called 'mysterious' or 'supernatural' powers, we follow the herd mentality and each one of us try to be the first one to prostrate before godmen.

Few days back I saw a teacher wearing a
taviz. Now, imagine teachers who are supposed to teach students science believing that wearing a taviz around his neck is good or that it will bring him prosperity and good luck! I am sure the teacher must have received the tavis from a mantrik after prostrating before him and donating money. What type of education can you expect from this type of teachers other than polluting the minds of young students with irrational ideas? We should not be surprised if the same students, when they grow up, start visiting people who claims to have the so-called mantrashakti.

It is also due to our ignorance and blind-faith that we rush to a ghadi or a bhagat when a dog or a snake bites us. Many times when the patient becomes all right, the ghadi or bhagat gets the credit. But the reality is that it is solely due to the snake being non-poisonous or the dog being non-rabid. Were the snake poisonous or the dog infected with rabbis, then surely the person would have died, but in that case the bhagat or ghadi would never get the blame; the blame would be upon the person's destiny!

Another thing I realised while travelling in some areas of U.P. and M.P (this does not excludes other States) is lack of proper health care facilities. Even where there are medical practitioners, they either lack experience or there is shortage of medicines. So what happens is, after taking treatment for some time and when the doctor realizes that the patient does not respond either due to wrong diagnosis or lack of proper medicines he straight away suggests to the family of the patient to take him for further treatment. The family takes it as a suggestion that the patient should be referred to a bhagat / Gunia for further treatment.

Most of the time we do feel cured after visiting a bhagat or a mantrik, drinking holy-water (?), or applying holy-ash (?). Here we should keep in mind the fact that most of our illnesses are psychosomatic in origin and due to our childhood conditioning about the miraculous power of mantriks, holy-man (?), etc, any suggestion given by them is accepted by our brain and we feel cured.

Sometime due to stress or other psychological reasons, sudden changes may be observed in the behavior of a person. If we don't know the scientific reason behind it, we tend to attribute this to black magic (Karni) etc and instead of visiting a psychiatrist, we visit bhagat. (Even today many people think that only mad people are treated by psychiatrists, whereas going to mantriks is socially acceptable. No stigma attached!)

Only inculcating scientific attitude in our day-to-day life will help us in getting rid of this fear of the unknown. We must heed the lines of Rabindranath Tagore:

"where the mind is without fear..."

Somu is associated with Goa Science Forum and is an executive member of Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations (FIRA)
On the auspicious occasion of Nagapanchami, there is a tradition for feeding milk to snakes. Symbolically, a bowl of milk is kept overnight in some remote corner of the house in evening and next morning it is presumed that snake has partaken it. This ritual symbolizes Hindus respect for all living beings, even for venomous snakes. No Hindu scripture lays down any injunction in this regard. Yet, Hindus do so. Only Hindutva can explain this phenomenon”. (D.P. Sinha, IAS (Retd.), Organiser, August 10, 2008)

Nagapanchami, the festival of snakes, this year was celebrated in Karnataka on 6 August 2008 with the usual religious fervour. Devotees could be seen waiting, from 4 am onwards, in labyrinthine lines in front of temples devoted to Nagadevatas – snake gods. Massive quantity of milk was wasted by pouring it on stone-images of snakes to propitiate the reptilian gods. Tiny silver replicas of human body parts were offered to the snake idols. Nagadevatas would, it is believed, bless the devotees and rid them of all ‘doshas’!

Seeing this devotion of the believers, a section of the urban environmental activists, especially the once-fashionable post-modern variety, sometimes come out with a curious claim similar to the one expressed by the Hindutva proponent quoted at the beginning of this essay. They argue that only a return to these sorts of pre-modern religious beliefs and ritualistic practices would save the fast depleting reptilian population. It is the rationalist world-view, they continue, that endangers the world’s flora and fauna by destroying their natural habitats.

I argue in this essay that this view is erroneous, that this rather romantic view of religious beliefs and rituals does not have any empirical basis. I contend that it is only a rational understanding about the ecology and nature that would help us prevent any ecological disaster. The environmental activists and ethicists who take the anti-rational stand in their genuine anguish over the destruction of the natural world base their views on a partial understanding of the religious beliefs.

Take for instance the festival of Nagapanchami itself. There is no record - empirical proof - that this festival with its elaborate ritualistic practices (most prominent among them being feeding the snakes or their idols with milk and the ubiquitous presence of snake-charmers) has ever had any positive impact on the preservation of the snakes. On the contrary, this festival has had disastrous consequences – not only in respect of the colossal waste of milk but also in respect of the very survival of snake population itself.
A newspaper report from Mumbai is revealing: “A ritual of death plays itself in the name of propitiating the snake God. Around 2,000 snakes die annually on Nagapanchami, which has even earned Mumbai another first to its name: it has scaled the peak of world records for the highest snake mortality on this day”. The report quotes Vijay Aware, a naturalist, according to whom, “the festival has always left behind a trail of dead and mutilated cobras. Nowhere have we heard of so many snakes being killed on one occasion”. The cobras, the report continues, “have been seized from sapers in deplorable conditions: teeth brutally ripped out leaving septic abscess in their mouths; jaws sewn with just enough room for the tongue to protrude; and starving. This treatment continues until the sapers have raked in enough moolah, or simply till the snakes die. The ordeal unfolds a month before Nagapanchami, explained Lilyn Kamath of World Wide Fund for Nature India. “The snakes are extracted from their burrows. Their mouths are stitched, their poison sacs punctured and fangs broken. They are then kept in earthen pots hung from trees until Nagapanchami,” maintained Kamath (The Indian Express, Mumbai, July 28, 1998). This extreme torture is meted out, unintentionally though, to snakes because believers are led by absurd beliefs about snakes couched in religious myths and folklores (and in the modern era, it is also fed by Indian masala movies) – that snakes drink milk, that they carry diamond in their forehead, that they listen and dance to the tune played by the snake-charmer, etc. As a result, the believers also tend to attribute human qualities to them. On the day of Nagapanchami, snake-charmers descend in droves on villages and towns and cities, carrying all sorts of snakes (all mutilated and starved) and people try to feed milk to them. None of the religious beliefs, of which the proponents of Hinduwta and their postmodern well-wishers gibber about, has discouraged the people from harming the snakes.

On the other hand, a well-founded knowledge about the snakes, the need to protect their habitats, the role each species of animals play in preserving the delicate ecological balance, the disastrous impact the destruction of the environment has on human life itself, etc together with the strict implementation of the law (Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960, etc) will have a greater impact on the protection of our reptilian friends.

Thus, the scientific knowledge that snakes do not drink milk (though it is reported
that “in a crises, when severely dehydrated, a snake might drink any liquid available” including milk. See: http://www.wildlifesos.com/rprotect/snake myths.htm. The snake charmers leave their snakes hungry for more than a month before the Nagapanchami in order that they are forced to drink the milk offered by the devotees) will deter people from offering them milk, leaving the precious commodity for better use. The fact that snakes do not have external ears to listen to the sound coming out of a been or pungi (the musical instrument used by snake charmers in India) may inspire the people to discourage snake charmers from torturing their snakes. The strict implementation of the laws has definitely played a major role in reducing the poaching of snakes over the years. But it has not yet completely stopped and for that the inducement provided by the festival of Nagapanchami is mostly to be blamed.

In addition to this it is also necessary to have a rational ethical understanding about Nature and our, human being’s, place in it. Our present day knowledge of ecology and environment informs us that we as a species have no special right in and on nature and prompts us to discard the anthropocentric view of universe handed over to us by a number of religions. As Professor Paul Kurtz, the well known American rationalist writes in “The Affirmations of Humanism: A Statement of Principles”, we want to “protect and enhance the earth, to preserve it for future generations, and to avoid inflicting needless suffering on other species”. It is this rational understanding, and not religious beliefs and obscurantist rituals, which would lead us to protect other species and preserve our environment.

An Email from Premanand

Dear friend,

Kindly rectify the following factual mistakes in the article "Premanand a life in search of Miracles"

1. Page 3 of Bangalore Skeptic July 2008 : Line 2 :- "... to theosophist parents'’. Change 'parents' to 'father'.

2. Page 4, Lines 6 & 7 of 2nd para :- "... permission of the gold control administrator for preparing, manufacturing, repairing or polishing gold". Delete the underlined words.

3. 4th para : Change 'January 2007' to 'November 2006'.

4. Page 7 : 2nd column last line. "... miracle exposure that gave me wide publicity". Change 'me' to "our work" and let me know.

With best wishes

B.Premanand
12 August, 2008

(The interview "Premanand: A life in Serach of Miracles" (Bangalore Skeptic, July 2008) stands rectified to the extent of the corrections pointed out in this letter. We regret the error. - Editor)
Abraham Kvooor: The Militant Debunker

T V Manoj

“Skepticism or debunking often received the bad rap reserved for activities – like garbage disposal – that absolutely must be done for a safe and sane life, but seem either unglamorous or unworthy of overt celebration”


Dr Stephen Jay Gould’s statement is only partly true in the case of Professor Abraham Kvooor, the celebrated Sri Lankan rationalist, whose 30th death anniversary falls on September 18, 2008. While Dr Gould is right in saying that debunking is an activity that must be done for a safe and sane life, it was not considered as an unglamorous one – at least as far as Professor Abraham Kvooor was concerned. Professor Kvooor who pursued debunking as a full time activity after his retirement from his teaching job became extremely popular in India and Sri Lanka, the citizenship of which he accepted after leaving Kerala. He was a popular guest in radio talk shows in Sri Lanka. He had close association with Sirimao Bandaranayke, the then Sri Lankan president. The Malayalam film Punarjanmam (directed by Sethumadhavan), which was based upon Prof Kvooor’s diary (Son and Mother) and in which he acted in his own role, was a box-office hit in Kerala in the Nineteen Seventies. Following the success of the film, it was remade in Tamil as Maru Piravi. The only two books (collections of his essays) which were published during his life-time (Begone Godmen and God, Demons, and Spirits, published by Jaico Books, Bombay) have always been in great demand as of today. These two books have been translated into various Indian languages (Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Punjabi, and Tamil) and have been hits with the readers. Professor Abraham Kvooor was indeed a celebrity rationalist!

Abraham Kvooor was born in Tiruvalla, Kerala on April 10, 1898 (Thus, in this year we celebrate his 110th birth anniversary too). His father, Rev. Kvooor Eipe Thomma Katthanar, was a Vicar General of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church of Malabar. After his education in Kerala and Kolkata, Kvooor took up teaching as a profession, first working in Kottayam, Kerala for a short period and later in Sri Lanka. Though born in a Christian family, he denounced Christianity in his adult life and became a rationalist as he “could not accept Bible as the word of an omniscient god”. He left Kerala, the land of his birth, and adopted Sri Lanka because “most of the Sri Lankans are followers of Gouthama Buddha who taught a more rational and tolerant philosophy than the founders of any other religion” (Page 7, On Christianity, Indian CSICOP, Podannur, Tamil Nadu).

Though Prof Kvooor had been investigating paranormal claims for decades even while he was in service, it was only after his retirement in 1958, at the age of 60, that he openly came out challenging godmen and proponents of paranormal phenomena. That itself is rare in that many people who in their younger days are staunch atheists, marxists, and social revolutionaries often turn, in their twilight years, to ideologies and religious dogmas they denounced earlier. In Prof Kvooor’s case, though he had been an atheist and a rationalist throughout his
adult life, it was during the last two decades of his life that he espoused militant rationalism.

Prof Kovoor’s Challenge

In the initial days of his activism, Prof Kovoor realised that his writings and lectures did not have the desired impact on the intended targets of his criticism a la godmen, astrologers, saints, yogis, etc. This prompted him to throw an open challenge to them. The first of his challenges was made in 1963 and was published in the Ceylon Daily Mirror on 17th June 1963. He offered an amount between Rs.1000/- to Rs.25000/- to anyone who can call correctly using his/her mystical powers the serial number on a ten-rupee currency note sealed in an envelope (Page 27, Exposing Paranormal Claims). The amount offered was subsequently enhanced to Rs.100,000/- along with the number of miracles challenged, which had by then increased to 23 items covering the entire gamut of paranormal claims usually made (See Appendix). Though his challenge was in force until his death in 1978, Prof Kovoor did not lose a single penny because of his challenge. On the contrary, he gained on a couple of occasions, when gullible followers of godmen accepted the challenge on their behalf by depositing the earnest money and later the godmen themselves failed to turn up!

Prof Kovoor — the science educator

It is not only because of his famous challenge that Prof Kovoor became a celebrity but also because of his essays and lectures that were suffused with rigorous scientific analysis. His essays on life-after-death, rebirth and reincarnation - the pet topics of Indian paranormal-mongers - are splendid examples of his brilliance as a science educator (A few of his articles are reproduced in this issue of Bangalore Skeptic).

In the essay, “Do we survive death?”, he writes: “I do not hold the view that my life is located in a particular spot in my body. Life is generated in all living cells in my body, and is sustained by the oxidoative chemical action which goes on in them. This chemical action is maintained by my breathing and blood circulation. It is not in any way different from the production of heat and light energies during the combustion of the hydrocarbon in a burning candle. Heat and light do no depart from a burning candle when it is put out, and return to it when relit.

“It is just a case of cessation of chemical activity and production of energy. Similarly there is nothing to get out from my body when it dies as a result of termination of breathing and blood-circulation. If by any chance my dead body is resuscitated by some of the modern techniques, it will be wrong to think that the ‘departed life or soul’ re-entered the revived body.

“My death will not be taking place abruptly at a particular moment in time. I began to die some 70 years ago. I started my life as parasite on my mother. About one-eighth of my body died in the form of the umbilical cord and placenta on the day I terminated my parasitic mode of life. From that day onward I have been dying as well as growing. While numerous cells in my body died daily, numerous new ones were born. Large quantities of dead tissues have escaped my body by way of cropped and shaved hair, peeled off skin, cut nails, dropped teeth, and the million of internal cells dead and discarded as waste during urination and perspiration.

“The process of continued death will go on till the day when there will be no more cells left behind to multiply. Even after the death of all the cells in my body, the cornea of my eyes will continue to live in the eyes of a lucky stranger.

“My last breath will not be any way different from the present ones. Then, as well as now, I shall be breathing out carbon
dioxide and water vapour.

“I do not believe that I have a soul or spirit to survive my death and go to heaven or hell, or to roam about as my ghost, or even to be reborn. It at all there is a soul, the major part of it should have escaped from me long ago with the large mass of dead tissues which have left me already; and even after the death of the present 125 pounds of tissues, a fraction of that soul should remain in the body of the stranger who would be receiving the corneal graft” (Page 41, *Soul, Spirit, Rebirth & Possession*).

**Divine Miracle Exposure Campaigns**

_The Divine Miracle Exposure_ tours Prof Kovoor undertook in India in the 1960s and 1970s were unparalleled. He along with his team members directly confronted a number of prominent godmen in their den. The confrontation his team had with the godman Sathya Sai Baba is memorable. After Sai Baba failed to respond to Kovoor’s letters repeatedly requesting to have an audience, he informed the godman that he would be visiting the godman’s ashram at Whitefield in Bangalore. By the time Kovoor arrived, Sai Baba had absconded and left for his ashram in Puttaparthi.

Prof Kovoor’s campaigns also resulted in rejuvenating the rationalist movements in India, by infusing a new vigour into the existing rationalist groups in India. It also resulted in starting new skeptic groups in various parts of the country. Undoubtedly, the skeptic movements in India are indebted to Prof Kovoor’s campaigns, lectures, and writings for what they are today.

**Reference:**

1. _Begone Godmen_: Jaico Books, Mumbai
3. _On Christianity_: Indian CSICOP, Podannur
4. _Exposing Paranormal Claims_: Indian CSICOP, Podannur
5. _Soul, Spirit, Rebirth, & Possession_: Indian CSICOP, Podannur

---

**Abraham Kovoor's challenge**

I, Abraham T. Kovoor of "Tiruvalla", Pamankada Lane, Colombo-6 do hereby state that I am prepared to pay an award of 100, 000 Sri Lankan rupees to any one from any part of the world who can demonstrate supernatural or miraculous powers under fool-proof and fraud-proof conditions. This offer will remain open till my death or till I find the first winner.

Godmen, saints, yogis, and siddhas, who claim that they acquired miraculous powers through spiritual exercises and divine boons win this award if they can perform any of the following “miracles”.

1. Read the serial number of a sealed up currency note.
2. Produce an exact replica of a currency note.
3. Stand stationary on burning cinders for half a minute without blistering the feet.
4. Materialise from nothing an object I ask.
5. Move or bend a solid object without the object touching the floor.
6. Read the thought of another person using telepathic powers.
7. Make an amputated limb grow even one inch by prayer, spiritual or faith healing powers, Lourdes’ water, holy ash, blessing etc.
8. Levitate in the air by yogic power.
9. Stop the heart-beat for five minutes by yogi power.
10. Stop breathing for thirty minutes by yogi power.
11. Walk on water.
12. Leave the body in one place and reappear in another place.
13. Predict a future event.
14. Develop creative intelligence or get enlightened through transcendental or yogic meditation.
15. Speak or understand an unknown language as a result of rebirth or by being possessed by a spirit, holy or evil.
16. Produce a spirit or ghost to be photographed.
17. Disappear from the negative when photographed.
18. Get out of a locked room by spiritual power.
19. Increase the quantity by weight of a substance by divine power.
20. Detect a hidden object.
21. Convert water into petrol or wine.
22. Convert wine into blood.
23. Astrologers and palmists, who hoodwink the gullible by saying that astrology and palmistry are perfectly "Scientific", can win my award if they can pick out correctly—within a margin of five percent error—those of males, females, and living and the dead from a set of ten palm prints or astrological charts giving the exact time of birth correct to the minute, and places of birth with their latitudes and longitudes.

I invite miracle performers like Satya Sai Baba, Pandramalai Swamigal, Neelakanta Tathaji, Nirmala Devi Srivastava, Pujya Dadaji, Dattabai, Triprayar Yogini, Gtirudev Anandamurthi, Kamubhai, Chinmayanand, Acharya Rajnessh, Muktanand, Swami Rama, Swami Haridas, Sivabalayogi, Bhagavan GnanaNanda, Gurumaharaj-ji, Maharish Mahesh Yogi, Hazarat Ali, Dr. Vdlaismudi, C. S. Teerthangar, R.P.Tiwari, Uri Geller, Neliya Michailova, Jeane Dixon, Sybil Leek and the numerous "professors" of astrology and palmistry, in India and numerous other gurus, swamijis, mahants, acharyas, andas, babas and bhagavans who have found fresh pastures and wealthier gullibles in Western Countries, to take up my challenge and prove to skeptics like me that they are not hoaxers.

He who does not allow his miracles to be investigated is a crook, he who does not have the courage to investigate a miracle is gullible, and he who is prepared to believe without verification is a fool.

- Abraham T. Kovoor -
Faith shaken after mysterious death of 2 children at Asaram Bapu ashram

Express News Service
Posted online: Tuesday, July 08, 2008 at 11:25:17
Updated: Tuesday, July 08, 2008 at 12:58:39

Ahmedabad, July 07 Organs of deceased children were found to be missing; exorcism suspected. It was not just the loss of two lives, but also a case of shaken faith in spiritual guru Asaram Bapu for Praful Vaghela and his brother Shantilal Vaghela. The two lost their children, who were enrolled in the Bapu's ashram in Motera village, under mysterious circumstances.

To add to the mystery are the missing organs of the children, with many believing they could have been targets of exorcism.

Joint Commissioner of Police Mohan Jha said, "Prima facie, it seems that the boys died due to drowning. However, it is not the final judgment and things will be clear after the reports of the postmortem and viscera samples are known."

While Praful Vaghela, father of Dipesh, is repenting not having checked the security arrangements at the Gurukul run by the ashram authorities before sending their sons, Abhishek's father Shantilal is in a state of shock.

"My brother, Shantilal, is an ardent follower of Asaram Bapu and on his insistence I had agreed to enroll the boys at the gurukul. But I did not know that the ashram authorities would be so irresponsible. I have faith in Asaram Bapu, but I would ask people to think twice before enrolling their children in the ashram," said Praful.

The Vaghelas have accused the ashram authorities of showing negligence in handling the boys. Suspecting involvement of someone from the ashram, the parents alleged that their wards must have been killed for black magic.

Praful's elder brother Suresh had on Sunday said that he has lost faith even in Asaram Bapu. "Two innocent children from his ashram have lost lives and yet there is no message from him. I have completely lost faith in him," he said.

Reacting to this, Uday Sangani, administrator of the ashram, said that to lose faith in the ashram is the personal matter of the Vaghelas. "I agree that there was security lapse, but after that we had taken enough efforts to find out the boys," he added.

Meanwhile, the residents of Ranip took out a protest rally against the ashram and the shopkeepers of the area observed a bandh to express solidarity with the victims' families. The rally marched through Ranip, Niranagar and Chandlodia areas, with the participants shouting slogans against the ashram authorities.

Violent protests in Ahmedabad over deaths in Asaram Bapu school

July 18th, 2008 - 9:09 pm ICT by IANS

http://www.thaindian.com/

Ahmedabad, July 18 (IANS) A protest over the mysterious death of two boys studying in a school of popular spiritual guru Asaram Bapu turned violent Friday with angry people attacking media persons and setting fire to vehicles and even homes. Bapu, who has a huge global following, himself faced irate crowds and barely managed to flee as a mob surrounded his car. Several parts of
Ahmedabad, especially the western area, witnessed violence as people protested the deaths of the two children, Dipesh Praful Vaghela, of Class 5, and Abhishek Shantilal Vaghela, of Class 6.

The two boys were studying in Asaram Bapu’s school and went missing on July 4. Their bodies were recovered from Sabarmati river bed on July 5 morning.

The father of Dipesh, Praful Vaghela, has alleged that the two boys were killed and thrown into the river after some ritual at the ashram. The police have not searched a cellar in the ashram which is studiously guarded by white-robed men, he alleged, adding that the police were trying to hush up the case with its shoddy investigation.

Protesters attacked buses in many parts of the city and set fire to houses in Shiv Shaktinagar near Motera area of the ashram. Some vehicles were also torched.

The situation turned out of control when members of the ashram came in busloads challenging the protesters. The sporadic violence then turned ugly when they attacked media persons. Many scribes were hurt.

The inmates did not spare a woman TV scribe of Aaj Tak news channel. She was allegedly beaten and her camera and that of some other photographers broken.

Police had to fire four rounds after some houses were set on fire at Shiv Shaktinagar. Most of those indulging in arson were from the ashram.

The trouble began in the morning when protesters started stopping people from going to the ashram on the occasion of Guru Purnima. Many devotees were forced to get down from the city buses and walk 2 km to the ashram. By afternoon, the ashram members decided to react following the insult to their guru. The men were armed with canes and went about attacking protesters and did not spare journalists.

Maninagar, the constituency of Chief Minister Narendra Modi, was also affected as roads were blocked by the protesters.

Nirmaynagar, where Dipesh’s home is located, was the epicentre of the violence. Police had to use canes on protesters to disperse them, leaving many injured, some seriously.

Agitators threw stones at the car of top police officials in Nirmaynagar. The police rushed in reinforcements after teargas and cane charge failed to control the mob.

In the morning, Asaram Bapu faced one of the most embarrassing moments of his life when he went to the house of Dipesh’s father Praful Vaghela. He had to flee within a few minutes after protesters booted him away and a menacing mob began surrounding his car, threatening his safety. Vaghela, who has been observing a ‘maun vrat’, or vow of silence, for the last four days ordered all the things that Asaram Bapu had touched in the house to be burnt. Even the wooden mat on which the godman sat was set ablaze. The other dead boy is the son of his brother Shantilal Vaghela.

Asaram Bapu has denied the accusations against his ashram and said he would cooperate with the police. The condition of Praful Vaghela is said to be deteriorating as he continues with his fast. The parents of the two boys have approached Chief Minister Narendra Modi and Governor Nawal Kishore Sharma, demanding a probe by an independent agency.

The Gujarat Congress, supporting the bandh, has charged the police with high-handedness that led to worsening of the situation. Siddharth Patel, the newly appointed Gujarat Pradesh Congress Committee president, visited the home of the family of deceased.

The Asaram Bapu ashram located near the banks of river Sabarmati is visited by his devotees for prayers, yoga and meditation. The Bapu, fondly called by his devotees as Sant Sri Asaramji, had set up the first of his many ashrams, numbering more than 200 worldwide, here in 1971. There is a special centre for women too at the place.

He has set up many ashrams the world over and also over 1,500 meditation centres. He is reported to wield strong political clout and the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) is one of his prime supporters. The ashram also is involved in many philanthropic activities all over the country as it provides financial aid to poor people including food, shelter, education. It therefore has a mass appeal.
Journalists beaten up by supporters of Asaram Bapu

Agencies
Posted online: Friday, July 18, 2008 at 02:56:42
Updated: Friday, July 18, 2008 at 02:56:42

http://www.expressindia.com/

Ahmedabad, July 18: Journalists were attacked and their equipment damaged on Friday by supporters of Asaram Bapu during a bandh called to protest against the mysterious death of two boys studying in the ashram's gurukul.

"We were outside the Ashram covering the bandh when supporters of the Bapu came out from inside and attacked us," Gopi Ganghar of Aaj Tak who sustained injuries in the incident said.

"They also damaged equipment and OB vans of the news channel," Ganghar, who was later hospitalised, said.

Bodies of two boys Abhishek Vaghela (11) and Dipesh Vaghela (10) were found dead on the Sabarmati river bank on July 5. They were reported missing from the ashram a few days before their bodies were found.

People of Ranip area where the boys belonged had called an Ahmedabad bandh which is being supported by the state unit of the Congress.

14 arrested from Asaram’s ashram

Special Correspondent

Saturday, Jul 26, 2008
The Hindu ePaper

AHMEDABAD: The police arrested 14 people from Asaram Bapu’s ashram in Motera, on the outskirts of the city, on Friday in connection with the attack on journalists and other violent activities during the bandh against the mysterious death of two boys in the ashram last week.

The police said they were looking for 18 more people identified from the videos of the electronic media. Seven persons, who were arrested earlier for attacking the journalists, were released on conditional bail.

While the police combed the ashram here, the officials of the Foods and Drugs department raided Mr. Asaram’s another ashram in Godhra and seized 56 bottles of medicines, allegedly manufactured by the inmates.

An official of the department said this followed complaints from some patients of a burning sensation in the eyes.

The Deputy Director of the Forensic Science Laboratory, Gandhinagar, along with CID (Crime) was assigned to help in the scientific investigation into the death of Abhishek (12) and Deepesh (11), students of the ashram school. Their bodies were recovered from the Sabarmati river bed behind the ashram.
Of God and Other Demons

Tusha Mittal

Tehelka
(16 August 2008)

Lured by the scent of mangoes, Manish Thakur and his friends wandered onto the property of spiritual leader Asaram Bapu in Motera village, Ahmedabad, on the banks of the Sabarmati. Suddenly, the boys heard shouts asking them to get out; as they scurried out, white-clad sadhaks followed them and beat them up. Manish, 12, was snatched, taken back to the ashram and locked inside a bathroom. Hours later, after villagers pleaded with the godmen – and paid money – Manish was released.

That was 10 years ago. Manish’s story is a tale parents used to warn children: “Don’t go near the Ashram”. If it’s also reminiscent of the Gabbar Singh warning from Sholay, the resemblance is not incidental – Asaram Bapu’s ashram inspired a similar miasma of fear.

Now, with the ashram’s gurukuls under scrutiny for four mysterious deaths of children, investigations have no leads but allegations of vice have raised uncomfortable questions (see box).

Emboldened, locals are speaking out. Ashok Thakore, 39, was threatened when he approached ashram officials to reclaim his five-acre plot. His father, Ramanji, had allowed devotees coming for Guru Purnima to set up tents on a section of his land.

After his death, when Thakore tried to use it for cultivation, ashram authorities refused. Thakore has proof that the land belongs to him; the ashram has no documents whatsoever to prove ownership, but continues to claim the land. “When I approached the ashram, Arvind Bhai, (a sevak) told me to take whatever money they are giving me as prasad and forget about the land”, says Thakore.

When he persisted in demanding his land, the sevaks upped the ante. “All of us are dressed in white, no one will know who killed you”, they threatened if Thakore didn’t back off. When he said he would go to court, the reply stunned him. “Ministers, collectors, DSPs come to us, they are all our sevaks, court mein kuch nahi hoga”, (nothing will happen) said a worker. It is only now that Thakore finally summoned the courage to file a case in the Gandhinagar High Court.

Rati Lal Patel woke up one morning to find a fence around his six-acre plot, with ashram security men guarding it. He too continues to fight a court battle. Gujarat High Court Judge MR Shah has reportedly said that the Surat ashram has been illegally built on government land. In Delhi, Asaram Bapu is reported to have forged documents of registry for his ashram in Rajokri, near Gurgaon. The case is before the Delhi High Court. The tehsildar of Rajokri says there is no evidence that Asaram ever bought this land. In Bihar, a government agency has given a final notice to Asaram to vacate land belonging to Bhikham Das Thakurbari, and occupied illegally by the ashram’s trust in Patna.

In Ahmedabad, there is a hushed eeriness about what really goes on inside the ashram. Most troubling is the silence of those who quit the ashram. Reva Patel and his wife live a few kilometres away; locals say Mrs Patel left the ashram after she discovered some dark realities. “The couple are scared for their life,” sources told TEHELKA. “We value our life, we don’t want to get involved”, says Rabbari.

But if there is fear among former disciples, new converts to the faith have not been hard to find. Asaram Bapu was in Delhi a day after a fourth boy was found dead in the gurukul in Chhindwara, Madhya Pradesh. Hundreds showed up at the satsang in Rajokri, where Asaram sat like a mortal deity inside a bullet-proof glass covering. “These incidents are a sazish against me”, he told TEHELKA.

The Asaram Bapu ashram began
Singh says, touching on a key factor in Asaram’s appeal.

The enthralled Singh even set up his own ashram in Chamba Ghati. When TEHELKA asked him where he got the funds, he was forthcoming. “I met an American, Morrison Bhai”, Singh began, adding, “I offered to carry a basket of apples for him. I followed him into a cellar, where I met Durbhai Seth, who thanked me and gave me Rs 500. He asked if there was anything else I wanted. I said, ‘yes, I would like to open my own ashram’, and Seth agreed to give me the money”. As soon as Singh mentioned the cellar and Seth, some sadhaks called Uday Sanghani, the ashram PRO. He told Singh he was being urgently called inside and whisked him away.

The shram is like an industry house: its publishing arm has 170 books; the magazine Rishi Prashad is published in Hindi and Gujarati; and it prints notebooks with Asaram’s photograph on the cover and teaching inside. “These are cheaper than the market rate. Lakhs are published every year. Low-income children can be given these books free or at discount rate”, say ashram promos, which compare Asaram Bapu to religious figures like Krishna, Buddha, Rama, Jesus and Mohammed. They also strategically display photos of politicians like Narendra Modi, LK Advani, Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Farooq Abdullah meeting bapu.

The Pura Singh incident is indicative of why many people believe that there is more to Asaram Bapu’s ashram than meets the eye. Ashram Authorities agree that though there are no exact numbers, there are many criminals turned sadhus. Unfortunately, in the context of current events, one could extrapolate that the reverse might be true – the ashram could have many sadhus turned criminals.

“Victims of Black Magic”

The parents of the two children found dead near Asaram Bapu’s gurukul are not convinced by the ashram’s explanations of the police investigation

It has been over a month since Dipesh Vadega, 10, and Abhishek Vadega, 11, were found dead on the banks of the Sabarmati, about 2.5 kilometers away from Asaram Bapu’s gurukul, where they had been enrolled since June.

The children were last seen at 8:30 pm on July 3. At the 9 pm roll call, they were missing. At 9:15, the authorities called the parents. The bodies were found on June 5.

What happened in those 48 hours? Ashram authorities

In doing this, Asaram has been recast larger than life. Part of this is because his core value, his unique selling proposition, is to gift followers a space in which to forget their own past, without judgement. And their collective amnesia over the mistakes in their past naturally extends to the guru, who cannot have done any wrong.

Sample some of his appeal: Meera Bai from Chandigarh believes a moment of eye contact with Asaram Bapu cured her blood cancer. Pura Singh, a dacoit from Chamba Ghati in Rajasthan used to loot money and jewellery, stopping buses with pistols like a latter-day Angulimala (a dacoit tamed by Lord Buddha). He stumbled upon an ashram brochure, visited - and was converted. “I was looking for a way out, and Asaram Bapu gave me that”,
say they mounted a massive search, so why weren’t they found earlier? “We thought they had gone for the Rath Yatra, so we looked in that direction”, Uday Sanghani, spokesperson for the ashram, told TEHELKA.

The parents, meanwhile, complain that the authorities did not allow them to file an FIR. Ashram workers told them that Bapu had to be informed first. His instruction: we at T-shirt the boys wore often turn it inside out, place it where they sleep, and wait for them to return.

The next day, when the children hadn’t returned, the parents went to the police, who were equally casual, asking them to wait. “Even when we finally got an FIR filed, the police did not begin any investigations or enquiry”, says Praful Vadega, Dipesh’s father.

On the night of June 5, the parents received a call from ashram authorities saying the bodies had been found. Praful Vadega and a few relatives found that Dipesh’s head had been shaved, his rib cage was open and his heart was missing. His T-shirt was beside his body, without a single mark. Abhikshek lay alongside, blackening with decay.

The parents allege that the police did not collect any valuable on-site evidence. Initial reports claimed “drowning” was the cause of death – in 1.5 feet of water. The missing heart was supposed to have been the work of an animal, but there were no other marks. “I think the children have been victims of black magic, they have been used as sacrifice”, says Praful Vadega. “Abhishek was born with his feet out first. It’s said black magic shows better results on such a child. And this happened on the night of amavasya”, says Abhishek’s father, Shanti Vadega. “The Gujarat government and police are in Asaram’s pocket, hence no proper investigation is being done”, he added.

After Praful decided on to go on a fast, he was approached by a local RSS member and asked to meet the chief minister. “Modi called for sharbat, and requested us to drink. We couldn’t refuse. He also called a photographer to document the breaking of my fast”, Praful adds. He says Modi told him: “I’ll give you even better investigation than the CBI. You will have to trust us”. And ordered a judicial enquiry.

The Vadega’s are looking for a powerful lawyer. “Asaram is big and powerful. My message to other parents is ‘please take your children out the gurukul’”, says Praful. “I don’t want other children to suffer the same fate”

- TUSHA MITTAL
Ahmedabad, Aug 26: Spelling more trouble for spiritual guru Asaram Bapu, the Gujarat High Court on Tuesday ordered that a case be filled against his ashram located in Motera locality of Ahmedabad in connection with the attack on journalists during the “Ahmedabad Bandh” on July 18.

The Gujarat High Court, while passing this order, also asked the spiritual guru to give appropriate compensation to those injured in the clashes.

The ruling came after an NGO, Jan Sangarsh Manch, through its PIL has demanded that the court should direct the state government to set up an SIT headed by the police officer of the rank of Deputy Inspector General to probe attacks by allegedly supporters of the spiritual guru.

Prior to today’s directive, the Bench of acting Chief Justice M S Shah and Justice J C Upadhyay had also issued notices to state government, state home secretary, state director general of police P C Pande and District Superintendet of Police, Gandhinagar.

The Motera center run by the Asaram Bapu Trust has refused to comment on the court’s order.

The ashram landed in trouble after half-a-dozen journalists, covering the incidents of mysterious deaths of two minor boys, were attacked by his followers.

The Gandhinagar police later arrested seven persons in connection with the attack on journalists during the “Ahmedabad Bandh” in protest against the mysterious death of two minor boys in the Asaram Bapu ashram.

All those arrested were later granted conditional bail by the Gandhinagar civil court.

The arrests were made after identifying the assailants on the video recording of the incident by the electronic media.

Religion is a collective insanity, the more powerful because it is traditional folly, and because its origin is lost in the most remote anitquity.

- Michael Bakunin -
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