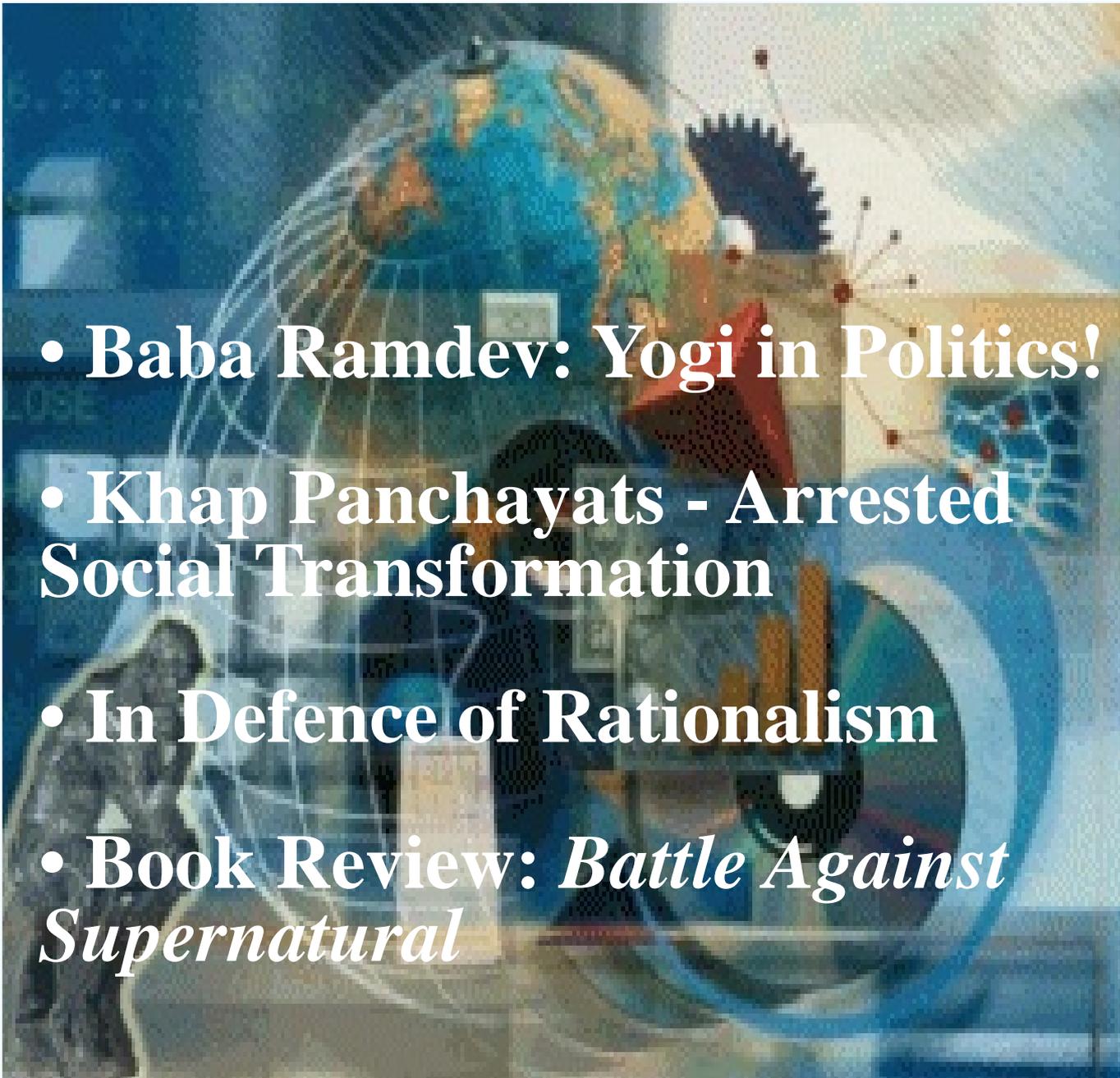


INDIAN SKEPTIC

No. 01/05

May 2010

- 
- **Baba Ramdev: Yogi in Politics!**
 - **Khap Panchayats - Arrested Social Transformation**
 - **In Defence of Rationalism**
 - **Book Review: *Battle Against Supernatural***

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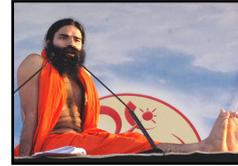
*It shall be the duty
of every citizen of
India -*

*to develop the
scientific temper,
humanism and the
spirit of inquiry and
reform*

*(Article 51A (h) Part IVA -
Fundamental Duties,
Constitution of India)*

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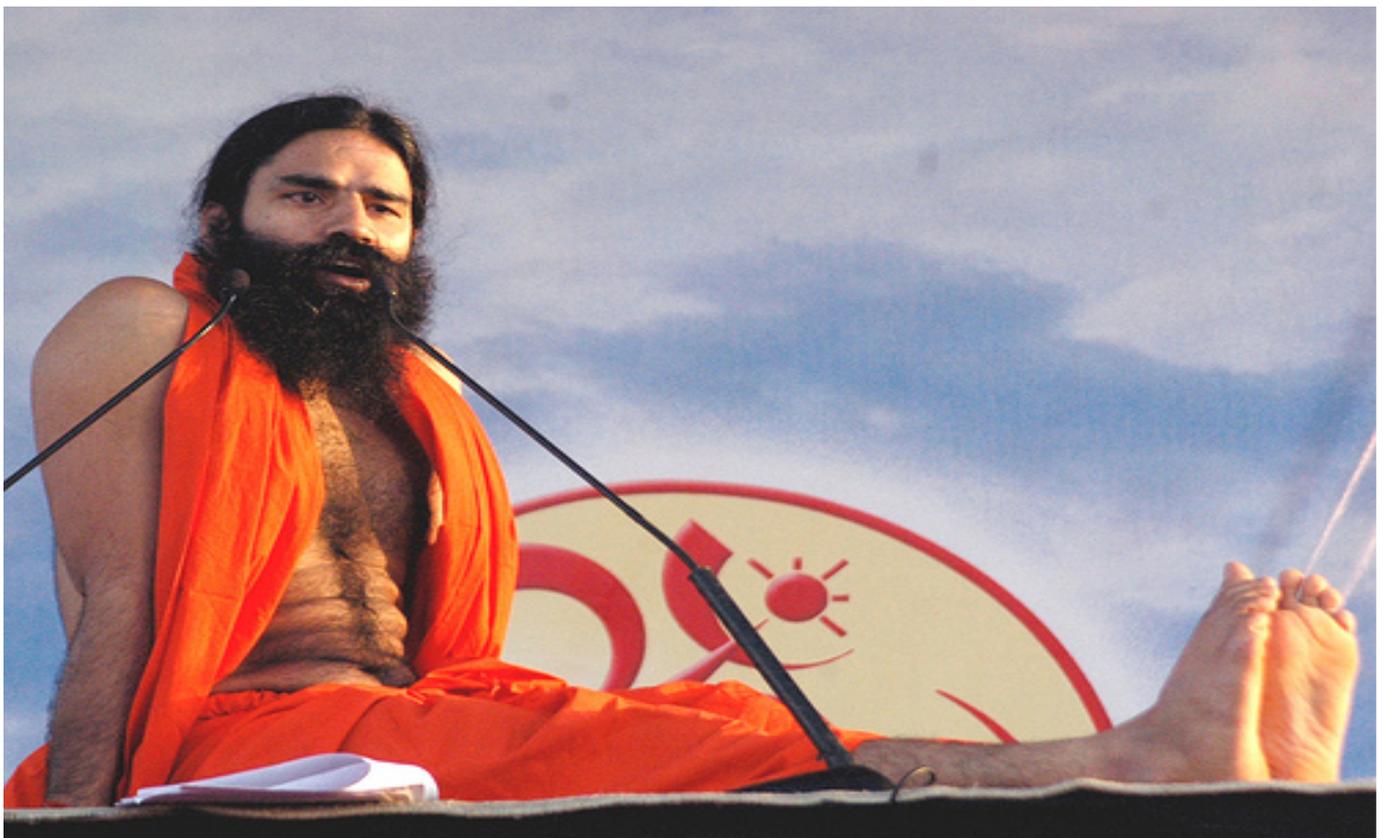
Yogi in Politics!

Narendra Nayak

The political space in India seems to be as large as the country itself. We have parties advocating everything from communism to capitalism, Hindutva to Islam, though not publicly, since the constitution prohibits it. We have the Manuvadi parties, the Dalit parties, parties of the OBCs, parties proposing an atheistic government and so on. Into this cacophony a new entrant has arrived, throwing his hat into the ring! All beware, the incorruptible, the squeaky clean, unmarried, physically fit superhero is here- step aside all, here is the man for whom the country has been waiting since independence- the messiah has finally arrived on the scene. Ram Kishen Yadav, aka Baba Ramdev who keeps churning his abdominal muscles on the stage, thumbing his nose at people and collecting millions in the name of yoga. If one watches his TV program one can see

him jumping about, performing contortions, panting for breath, and as soon as he gets it back, uttering platitudes about everything under the sun, moon and stars!

He has simplistic solutions for all problems. Want to solve the poverty problem? Bring the money stashed in Swiss banks. Homosexuality is a disease and the cure for it is yoga. Its not one or two things that he talks about but, as previously said, he has an encyclopedic knowledge about all matters. He is a text book on medicine, surgery, nutrition, physical exercise, psychiatry and whatever one may need. Do you have a problem? Perform kapalbathi and pranayam. He talks about the good old days, lecturing about the skeleton of a 12 feet tall person discovered at an undisclosed location, and how the good food and clean air back in



those days made them grow that big. To hell with medical evidence indicating that a 7 feet tall person can find it difficult to live a normal life because the human body has its logical and mechanical limitations.

It has been a long climb to the top indeed for a contortionist to develop into a guru with solutions for all the problems facing us. He wants to start with India and make it the healthiest nation in the world. Then he wants to go out and do the same to the rest of the world! When he predicted several years ago that there would soon be a cure for AIDS, obtained from a combination of ayurveda and yoga, Ramdev got into

am fine". He- "So, this is modern medicine for you, in the grip of the multinationals!" Then another round of contortions, heavy breathing, devotional songs etc. These are called as yog shibirs. On his stage are a few younger people doing the very same poses which he asks all people to do.

He has one more collaborator who goes to gardens, fields or anywhere that has greenery and brings back all sorts of leaves and plants. Ramdev holds lectures on these, listing their botanical names and dishing out advice on what they can heal and/or prevent. Of course, no sort of evidence or clinical trials are needed. You just have to

When he predicted several years ago that there would soon be a cure for AIDS, obtained from a combination of ayurveda and yoga, Ramdev got into trouble with a Health Minister from the central government who asked him to prove his claims or shut up because such talk could disrupt the campaign for the prevention of AIDS. Ramdev then gave a long-winded explanation for what he actually said, claiming he had been misquoted.

trouble with a Health Minister from the central government who asked him to prove his claims or shut up because such talk could disrupt the campaign for the prevention of AIDS. Ramdev then gave a long-winded explanation for what he actually said, claiming he had been misquoted.

In his TV shows he has patients barging in with so-called 'medical reports' which he reads out in a halting manner, mispronouncing many of the medical terminologies. It runs like this: A middle aged lady goes to the stage with a report, which he reads out loud. Then he says- "Well, well what did the doctors say about this?" She answers- "Baba, they told me I would die in six months. Another dose of sarcasm- "Then you had to die". She- "No Baba, I did not I start doing yoga and now I

take his word for it. The only proof that is offered is that our ancient texts say these things. When the swine flu epidemic hit the world he had a solution for it- boil a particular root in water and drink its extract to prevent the flu. The prices for that root went through the roof and no one was willing to listen to what we said- that it was like any other type of seasonal flu and would pass off. Now, the statistics has vindicated our stand. Of course, he can claim that it was his combination of yoga and ayurveda that saved India.

What about his "medicines"? People have to sign an undertaking saying that they knew the "medicines" were not approved, to absolve him of any liability for any possible ill-effects arising from their use! He manufactures them at facilities which employ sweat shop labor. When they went

on strike demanding fair wages, he set his goons upon them. When the trade unions of the left parties supported laborers and exposed the formulae of some of Ramdev's concoctions, he made his usual allegation that they were tools of the multinationals. He was adding human bones to some of the "medicines" after powdering them; he defended this by saying that it was permitted in ayurveda. There are many such controversies about his panaceas, which are very, very expensive. The same allegation of exploitation that he makes against the multinationals is equally applicable to him, if not more! At least their products are based on evidence and

Well, who exactly is Ramdev?

If one looks at the audience at his sessions- for which one has to pay huge donations despite his talk of egalitarianism- the fat cats who pay hefty 'donations' are located close to the dais and are given more elbow room to carry out their maneuvering. The others have to lump it out far away from the stage, performing their contortions in cramped conditions. That is equality for you. As George Orwell said, all animals are equal but some are more equal than others. That is applicable to the disciples of Ramdev as well. But, for the over weight middle class with their sagging bellies,

What about his "medicines"? People have to sign an undertaking saying that they knew the "medicines" were not approved, to absolve him of any liability for any possible ill-effects arising from their use! He manufactures them at facilities which employ sweat shop labor. When they went on strike demanding fair wages, he set his goons upon them. When the trade unions of the left parties supported laborers and exposed the formulae of some of Ramdev's concoctions, he made his usual allegation that they were tools of the multinationals.

clinical trials while his concoctions are marketed on his word alone and the claim that it is a truth found in ancient texts.

Ramdev's hypocrisy needs to be pointed out here. On stage with a captive audience, he launches into tirades against the 'corrupt' politicians. But nothing prevents him from hob-nobbing with them, traveling with them on state helicopters and utilizing millions of rupees given as 'grants for research'. He conveniently forgets that this money comes from the pocket of the tax payers, 300 million of them being malnourished, poverty stricken and with naturally flat stomachs caused by the years of malnutrition, and hence not impressed by his contortions on stage.

Ram Kishan Yadav is fitness personified. They want easy solutions to their problems; they would like to have toned bodies, full hair on their balding pates and, in short, quick and easy solutions for all their problems without having to work hard. His yoga classes look like the easy solution that these people seek. That is why we see the tension-ridden middle classes flocking there. Some exercise may work for some of them and these people shout it from the roof tops. Those for whom the exercises do not work, constituting the larger group, will be silent like they are expected to be - the silent majority! Again, he is very clever when offering advice to patients with serious problems; if they have diseases like cancer they will be told to continue with

their therapy but also consume his concoctions and do things like pranayama etc. If they are cured he can take the credit- if not the money grabbing multinationals and the doctors can be blamed! In his much publicized 'public' debates with some of the branches of the Indian Medical Association, he cleverly wriggles out of tight situations by uttering cliches like you do your job and I will do mine. I recall a few similar instances, like when the Indian Medical Association branch of Goa 'collaborated' with him, having themselves photographed at his feet. When the national secretary of FIRA queried the office bearers as to why they were seen in such a position with a person who is opposed to them, the lame excuse was that they were just joining him for his anti tobacco campaign!

Why does this colorful personality wants to enter politics- or rather, why does he want to embrace the "dirty world of politics" as he says? It isramdev-baba the desire for power on one hand and for safe-guarding his empire on the other? Huge grants have been taken for establishing 'research institutes' but nothing useful has come out of them so far. Under the right to information act anyone can ask for the details of this funding and also ask for the results. Once these scandals come out there is going to be trouble. Not everyone in India is fat and middle-class- Ramdev's constituency! He wants to get at other groups of people, for which he needs a larger net. Another factor is the large amount of black money that he must have amassed marketing his useless concoctions. Despite of all his claims to egalitarianism they are really expensive- more expensive than the concoctions of the multinationals whom he derides, but at least the latter are required to be scientifically tested to do what they claim to! Ramdev has forayed abroad and purchased his own island from where he hopes to market these concoctions without the need to satisfy regulatory bodies about their effectiveness.

Ramdev wants to be the 'C team' of the

Hindutva gang. The A team- the right wing Bharathiya Janatha Party- has undergone a decline in growth, becoming stagnant. The rabid right wing groups like the Shiv Sena that form the B team are divided and losing their appeal. There is a need for one more team with more appeal to a different constituency, and that is what Ramdev is trying to create! While decrying all politicians as corrupt, he does not mind sharing the stage with the likes of Advani and co. While mocking the Congress party, he is not averse to taking grants from states run by that party. He feels that he has an appeal to his community- though he claims to be a ascetic with no caste, he is a Yadav, a dominant caste in many areas of the cow belt. Again, the saffron robes and the halo of being a renunciate may influence the electorate into voting for his candidates, and he hopes to win seats and worm his way into ruling combinations. No sir, he does not want power. He wants to reform the nation! He will not contest for elections but will put up honest, sincere, dedicated candidates who will do the task of nation building. In other words he wants to be a remote control and play the king maker!

Coming to the great personality himself one wonders why the cure-all yogic and the ayurvedic concoctions that he peddles are unable to cure his ever-present facial tic. What yogic quality makes him dye his hair and beard? The vanity of the renunciate? Is he the Hindu version of Benny Hinn? These questions will be answered soon when he enters electoral politics which has an audience that is not quite as captive and will need contortions of a different kind.

BS

***Prof Narendra Nayak is the
president of Federation of Indian
Rationalist Associations***

Arrested Social Transformation

Khaph Panchayats Asserting Caste-Gender Hierarchy

Ram Puniyani

Khap Panchayats, the age old upholders of caste norms have been in the news for all the wrong reasons. While these Panchayats (assembly) had some role in settling the community disputes, these exclusively male bodies, dominated by village elite have been asserting the values of past, gone by era and stand in the way of the values of Indian Constitution, the values of Liberty Equality and Fraternity. These are very active in Harayana region in particular, the same place where incidents of anti dalit brutalities against Dalits, and the incident where dalits were killed on the pretext that they are killing cows.

It is no coincidence that in the nearby Jhajjar also similar incident had taken place just a few years ago. The recent (April 2010) developments in the aftermath of brutal killing Manoj and Babli are very disturbing and also reflective of the social situation prevailing in large parts of the region in the country. Manoj and Babli, belonging to same Gotra, got married and due to fear of the panchayat, fearing the threat to their lives, sought legal protection. While returning from court with police escort they were caught hold of and taken in a jeep, while police men and others were witnessing the act. The couple was killed mercilessly. The killers were from same village, belonging to the family and close relatives. The abettor was the panchayat chief. The Judge in a forthright judgment gave death punishment to five of them and life imprisonment to one and seven year jail term to another.

The Khaph panchayat rather than feeling the



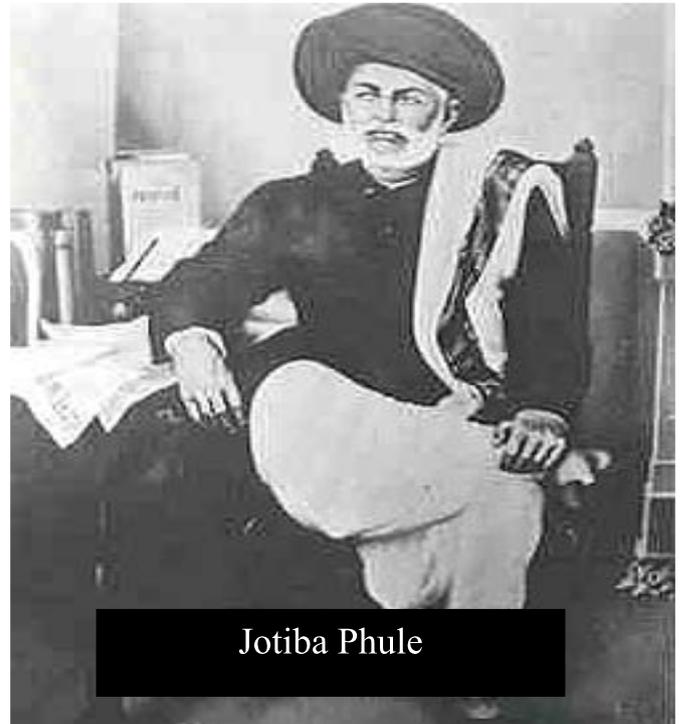
guilt and shame of the incident went on offensive and started saying that those youth going on the path of Manoj and Babli will be given similar treatment. Incidentally before this ghastly incident nearly hundred young couples have been done to death or punished in various ways by these Panchayats. After the judgment they called a bigger meeting and demanded that Hindu marriage law be amended to ensure that people from same Gotra (Sub caste) cannot marry. They are deciding to intensify their agitation.

There are parallel examples of many Muslim families killing their defiant youth, who preferred to get married on their own choice, transcending the boundaries laid by social customs. These killings are many a times called 'Honor Killing'. Meaning the choice of girl and boy of their life partner has to conform to the norms of the community-family else killing those defying these norms is an "honor" for the family, caste. It is the make believe honor of the family which is carried forward by close relatives like brothers, uncles etc

One witnesses similar cases coming from Pakistan also as the social rigidities are probably much stronger in parts of the feudal dominated Pakistan society.

These incidents reflect the deepening of the process of caste rigidification during last few decades. Varna and jati system has been the norm of Hindu society, legitimized by various Holy Scriptures. The same caste system also affected partly the Muslims and Christians, whose scriptures don't permit this but surely social practices are not merely guided by the Holy books.

The processes of caste and gender transformations always run parallel. These transformations began slowly during British rule, parallel with the growth of freedom struggle. The National movement and more particularly the process of education for dalits and women, initiated the social reformers resulted in the beginning of this transformation. The evil practices existing during that time were opposed and many a social reformers Jotiba Phule, Savitiribai Phule, Dr. Ambedkar, Ram Mohan Roy and Mahatma Gandhi fought against these practices. Ram Mohan Roy's main focus was on the evil of Sati, burning of bride on the funeral pyre of her husband. Gandhi's major concern was against untouchability, the custom most

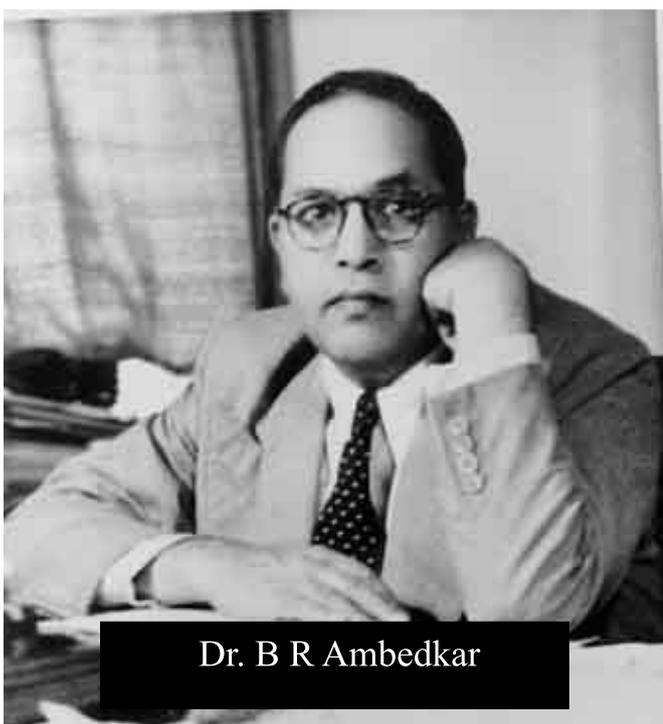


Jotiba Phule

abominable and deeply reflective of the caste system and the place of Shudras in the social system. While Phule-Ambedkar were demanding and agitating against these practices in a strong and radical way other reformers also chipped in and took the reform process far and wide.

These reform processes logically should have been accompanied by land reforms and relegation of the role of clergy to the private realms of social life. National movement did succeed to some extent in bringing forth these issues to social attention. Indian Constitution forthrightly puts forward these provisions. The process of industrialization and education gradually started loosening the grip of caste and gender hierarchy, and the retrograde norms during the first three decades of the republic though the speed of this transformation was slow. Women started entering social arena and dalits came up in good measure in social sphere during this time.

From the decade of 1980 the process seems to have been arrested and the economic policies, the adverse effects of globalization, cultural movement accompanying them, the global rise of fundamentalism and the ascendance of politics in the name of religion and Ram



Dr. B R Ambedkar

Temple agitation in India were the multiple factors due to which the process of transformation faced obstacles. These processes changed the cultural terrain of society and rather than rational progressive thoughts and practices, traditional conservatism started getting stronger. During this time the atrocities against dalits and women went up, samples of which were Roop Kanwar Sati in Deorala and Bhavri Devi case. The atmosphere of cultural terror got intensified. The major focus was on controlling the weaker sections of society in the name of 'glorious traditions'. This did intimidate the dalits and women. Minorities also faced increasing violence against them during this time, resulting in their ghettoization and strengthening of orthodox elements within the community.

When Dr. Ambedkar introduced Hindu code bill, and made efforts to give equality and freedom to women, the bill was diluted before implementing itself. The conservatives in the society stood to oppose the same. Pundit Nehru went on to say that our constitution is progressive but society is in the grip of orthodox traditions. The hope was that these orthodox traditions will

weaken with time, and as a matter of fact they actually started weakening during initial decades of the republic when the rational norms and practices started getting respectability.

Currently we seem to be seeing an arrest of this process of transformation in the progressive direction. The major causative factor does seem to be the cultural accompaniments of politics in the name of religion. This politics externally targets the minorities but its deeper agenda is that of opposing the equality of dalits and women. What these Khap Panchayats are doing is to put a control on the freedom of adults to choose their life partners and their style of living. Simultaneously they are attempting to control the lives of women, the core of patriarchal politics, a politics which is presented as nationalism and glorious tradition, by those doing politics in the name of religious identity.

BS

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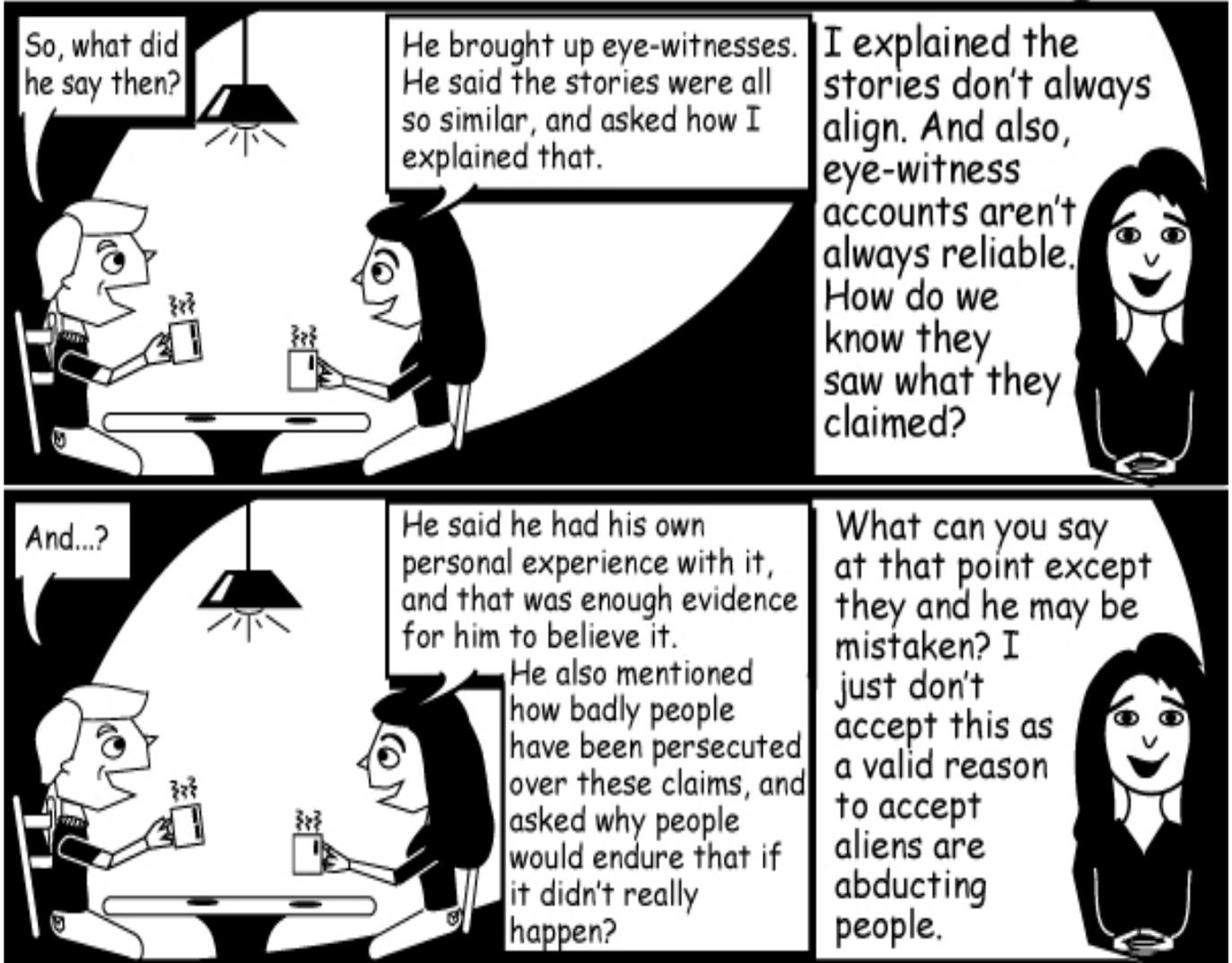
The most detestable wickedness, the most horrid cruelties, and the greatest miseries that have afflicted the human race have had their origin in this thing called revelation, or revealed religion. It has been the most destructive to the peace of man since man began to exist.

Thomas Paine

The Age of Reason

ATHEIST EVE

THE DESIGN ©2010



Tracie Harris is a graphic designer in Austin, Texas, US. 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/atheisteve/>. *Atheist Eve* is reproduced by *Indian Skeptic* with the author's permission.

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In Defence of Rationalism

T V Manoj

What is Rationalism?

In Epistemology (the branch of philosophy studying the nature, sources and limits of knowledge) “*Rationalism*” is “the theory that reason rather than experience is the foundation of certainty in knowledge”. Those who accept rationalism in this epistemological sense assert that knowledge is gained *a priori* (prior to experience) and is often contrasted with *Empiricism* which is “the theory that all knowledge is based on experience derived from the senses”.

Regardless of the validity of the epistemological position of rationalism, that is not the sense in which the word rationalism is generally used in the context of a Rationalist Movement that is actively

involved in eradicating religious prejudices, fundamentalism, casteism, superstition and blind beliefs, debunking unsubstantiated claims, developing critical thinking, and promoting skepticism and secular humanist ideology. Rationalism in this sense is “the practice or principle of basing opinion and actions on reason and knowledge rather than on religious belief or emotional response” (*Concise Oxford English Dictionary-11th Edition*). The reasoning of course is the *scientific reasoning*, which is, to quote Alan Sokal & Jean Bricmont, “a respect for the clarity and logical coherence of theories, and for the confrontation of theories with empirical knowledge” (*Intellectual Imposters*).

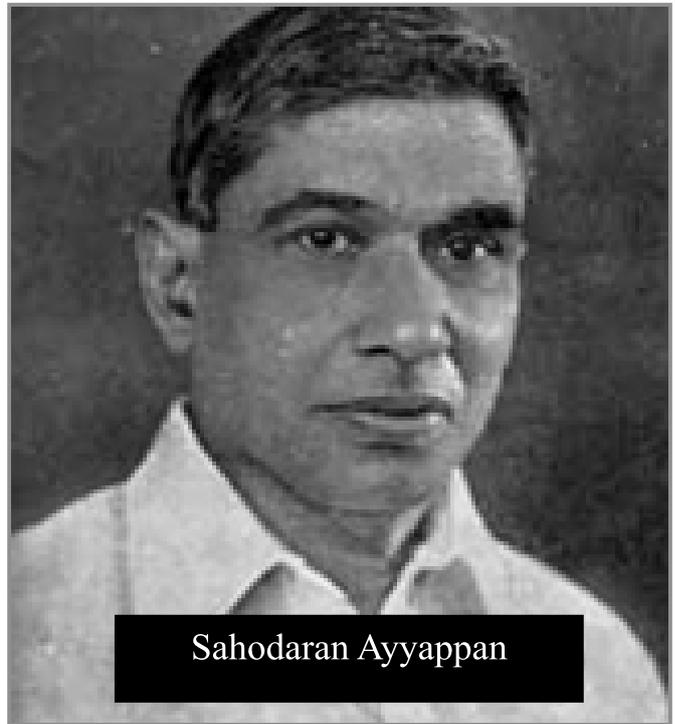
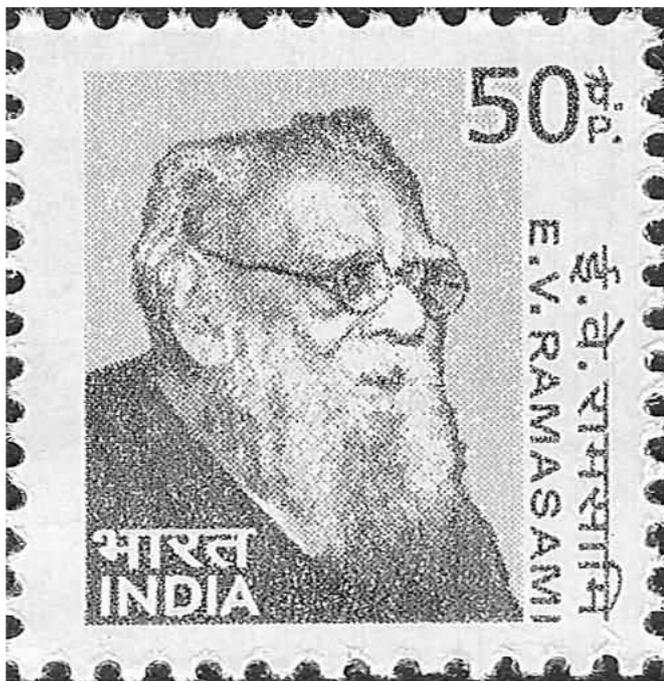
This broad definition of rationalism used in the context of a rationalist movement should be kept in mind while we further



Is atheism our exclusive concern?

Rationalists in India have often been criticized by some progressive fellow travelers (criticism coming from religious quarters need not concern us here) for what they call the exclusive preoccupation of rationalists with promoting atheism, and exposing godmen and their miracles.

This criticism is not correct - for two reasons. First, though most (or all) of the rationalists do adopt an atheist metaphysic, promotion of atheism has never been their sole concern. The early proponents of rationalism in South India (of which I am more familiar) such as EV Ramaswamy (Tamil Nadu), Gora (Andhra Pradesh) and Sahodaran Ayyappan (Kerala) were all in the forefront of anti-caste movement. In fact, the credit for reshaping the socio-political landscape of modern Tamil Nadu should be given to EVR. Sahodaran Ayyappan, one of the founding fathers of rationalist movement in Kerala, was closely associated with the social reform movement spearheaded by Sri Narayana Guru. Atheist Centre founded by Gora, an uncompromising Gandhian-atheist, played a phenomenal role in eradicating untouchability in parts of Andhra Pradesh. H Narasimhiah, a nuclear physicist and the most prominent face of rationalism in Karnataka, was a well known educationist.

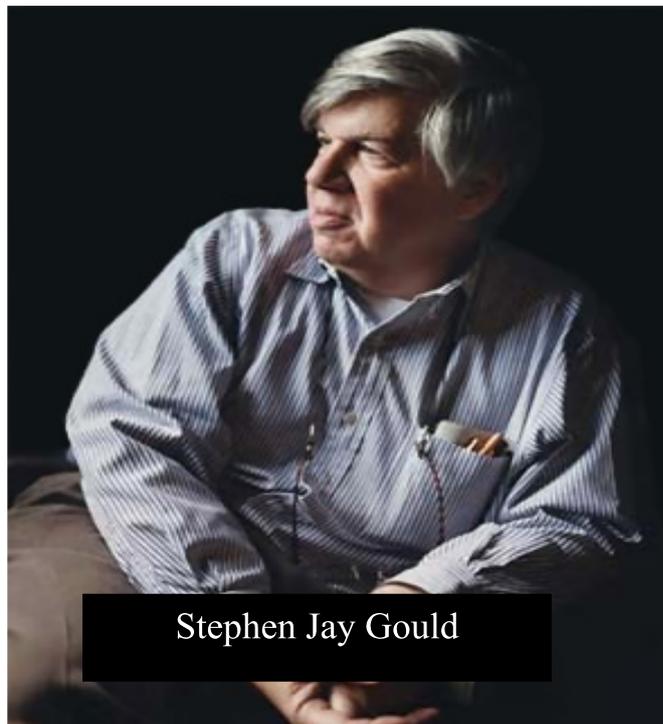


Defending Debunking

Second, the overt association of rationalist movement with miracle exposure has possibly to do with the wide media coverage received by the hugely successful miracle exposure campaign undertaken by Abraham Koor in the 1960s and 70s. Miracle exposure or debunking is, however, not something to be scorned at. As Stephen Jay Gould, the well known evolutionary biologist and Marxist, said in his forward to *Why People Believe Weird Things* written by Michael Shermer, skepticism or debunking is “like garbage disposal that absolutely must be done for a safe and sane life”. If this is true of USA, it is more so in a society like ours steeped in religious rituals and dogmas. Moreover, the ‘gurus’ like Swami Chinmayananda, Asharam Bapu, Amrithananda Mayi, not to say the whole battery of ‘sanyasins’ who took part in the ill-conceived Ramajanmabhoomi agitation, were all hand in glove with the anti-secular Hindu fascists at critical moments. We, the rationalists, hence need not be apologetic about our campaign. We should continue to mercilessly expose these godmen who not only defraud the masses with their ‘spiritual’ demagoguery, but frequently encroach upon politics to the detriment of secular politics in India.

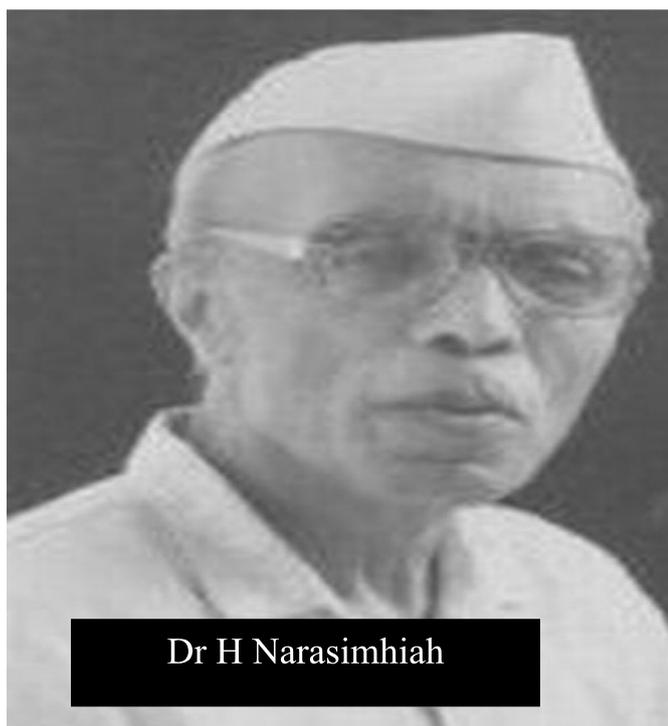
Debunking is also a tool to teach critical thinking. But why critical thinking, one may ask. Are not deliriums more soothing than reason? As an author of a book on Critical Thinking writes, “if we need soothing, then it is reasonable, if they are not harmful, to seek such dreams and deliriums, and to do so efficiently. Logic, reason, and straight thinking are tools, our most important tools, for attaining what we want, and for evaluating what we think we want” (Perry Weddle, *Argument: A Guide to Critical Thinking*).

There is however a lesson to be learned from the criticism. It is that we the rationalists should not confine ourselves to exposing astrologers and traditional godmen like Puttaparthi Sai Baba (though we should continue to do this as we have an unending stream of this species trying to occupy the uncertain minds of the religious people), but widen our area of interest. This is because the godmen of today, such as Baba Ramdev or Sri Sri Ravishankar, masquerading themselves as medical men or wellness experts, have been making astounding claims about their ‘ancient wisdom’ or breathing techniques. They conduct satsangs and regularly appear on TV channels peddling their wares and deliriums. In the process they play havoc with the lives of the people who search for



Stephen Jay Gould

a cure for a chronic illness, a new epidemic, or even extreme anxiety. We have witnessed this recently when Ramdev claimed to have a cure for AIDS and when he recommended Amrithaballi for swine flu. Some of them conduct training courses in various ‘levels’ of breathing techniques (‘basic’, ‘advanced’, more advanced – as if we don’t know how to breath!) charging a hefty fee and the people throng to them year after year, course after course, even if they fail to gain any tangible benefits out of it.



Dr H Narasimhiah

Another category is the ‘new-age’ spiritualists a la Deepak Chopra (incidentally, this is the man who wrote a forward to a book authored by the American trickster, Uri Geller) who makes unsubstantiated claims about spiritualism, yoga or ayurveda. We should enlist the services of scientists and medical professionals (including competent ayurvedic physicians) to expose their wild and unproven claims.

Defending Secularism

What rationalists in India value the most, above all else, is perhaps secularism; debunking godmen, miracles, fraudsters, quacks and pseudoscience comes only next. Secularism forms part of the very preamble

of the Indian constitution. Though the word 'secularism' was inserted into the preamble only in 1976 by an amendment, our constitution has been illuminated with the spirit of secularism from the very beginning. As the Supreme Court of India asserted in the *Keshavanada Bharati case (Kesavananda Bharati v. The State of Kerala)*, secularism is an un-amendable part of the Indian constitution. The court said in the Bommai case (SR Bommai vs Union of India) that the concept of the secular state is essential for the successful working of the democratic form of government.

The secularism practiced in India, however, suffers from certain infirmities. Though the concept of secularism demands an absolute separation of the state subjects and religion, this has often been not the case in the Indian context. The right granted to the religious minorities to run their own educational institutions, unhindered by any state interventions, is a case in point. The subsidy granted to Haj pilgrims is another. This infirmity was compounded by certain rulings of the highest court of the land – for instance, the verdict on Hindutwa holding that resorting to the electoral platform of Hindutva in and off itself could not be a corrupt practice. The recent dismissal of a petition seeking a ban on immersion of idols during festivals (the serious ecological damage to the water-bodies caused by paints used in the idols have been noted by various studies) saying it concerns the right to religious practice (The Hindu, 21 November 2009) is another example of certain retrogressive rulings by our court.

All these point to the absence of a secular

culture among the people of India. Secular politics in its true spirit is possible only if the people themselves are imbued with the spirit of secularism. A secular state with a religious citizenry is a contradiction. All the ailments that mar secularism in our country are due to this glaring contradiction. Only a secular state with secular citizenry will continue to guarantee us the invaluable gains we made over the years – democracy and human rights. Hence, a principal component of the rationalist movement in India should be the unrelenting propagation of secular values among the people.

So, what kind of future are we envisaging at? Here I would better quote, once again, Alan Sokal & Jean Bricmont: “the emergence of an intellectual culture that would be rationalist but not dogmatic, scientifically minded but not scientific, open-minded but not frivolous, and politically progressive but not sectarian”.

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BS

Such evil deeds could religion prompt.

Lucretius
De Rerum Natura

Role of Rationalism in Eradicating Communalism

Part - II

R.G.Rao

But The main problem for rationalist is that they are equally hated by all religious and fundamentalists groups, and hence can sometimes find themselves aligned with same modern myths that communalists propagate like the benefits of yoga, Ayurveda, pseudoscience like homeopathy, etc. So not to get into this trap we should be well informed not only in the subjects like religion but other subjects like history, medicine, anatomy, physiology, astronomy, Psychiatry etc. If we learn and keep ourselves well informed with the latest discoveries in the field of science than we care full not to push them further into the fanatics camp while promoting rationalism. Agreed, there is an overriding need in India today, to encourage and cultivate the rationalist outlook. Indeed, the growth of rationalism is the key to get rid of religious fanaticism. What is true of India is true of the entire world. Our country is a testing ground for the validity of rationalism for the future of humankind. A country with over one billion people,. It is home to pluralistic and linguistic enclaves and contending religious traditions. Many of these go back to several centuries, and are

Spiritualistic doctrines often advise retreat, withdrawal, self-denial, or they often focus on salvation. The new secular morality, on the other hand, seeks happiness and realization in this life here and now.

can educate people and also counter arguments from the fundamentalist's camp. Secondly merely countering the arguments also want work as people join the fundamentalists forces because either they are convinced of the good work they are doing or there is some other reasons like sense of belonging which may be working as support system for the person with weak mind, insecure person. So what they need is love .As many times the last argument of communal groups is that their stated belief and facts are matter of Faiths, where as in rationalism even facts has to stand the scrutiny for its facts and context for the progress of humanism. So we should be deeply ingrained in social customs and traditions. Rationalists look for methods that will best help to discover new truths, most successfully resolve complex human problems, and realize human needs and values. And we believe that it can be done by applying reason, science and educating public. We can use reason and science to reconstruct our values, making them more appropriate to the actual conditions. Ancient spiritualistic doctrines often advise retreat, withdrawal, self-denial, or they

often focus on salvation. The new secular morality seeks happiness and realization in this life here and now. Among its key ingredients are education, rationality, the fulfillment of a person's talents and potentialities and the development of self-determination and a sense of power over one's own destiny. And no religious factions should be allowed to block social reform.

We are concerned with the welfare of the human beings. So on the rationalist agenda today to fight communalisms, is to encourage the use of reason, science and critical inquiry, secondly we should sit down and reason together, and negotiate our differences beyond our preexisting nationalistic or religious prejudices. We should make new efforts to find common ground. Perhaps it is too much to ask others to abandon their deep-seated religious convictions. At least, we should try to get them to modify them in the light of reason and to replace dogma with tolerance and the willingness to understand the views of others. Above all, we need to convince all humans to at least respect and allow freedom to believe or not to believe: this is the first principle of a democratic society. It is clear that the Rationalist movement can and should play a momentous role. As on today our measure programs are concerned with Explanation of the Miracles. We definitely needs such programs as it creates curiosity and doubt about such so called miracle events, but along with the Miracle Performances we should also highlight on

the other principles of Science. We have to talk to the people at their level in their language and that also as far as possible without hurting their sentiments. few among us have already started doing this. We should also try to identify different target groups like the young boys and girls, the woman, the urban and the rural, the elite educated class of people. The educated, elite class is a hard nut to crack. The educated superstitious people will argue vehemently to justify their beliefs and prejudices. They have their arguments to make a case for Existence of God and the Supernatural and the Power of Spiritual etc. So we have to have separate strategy for the educated, elite class.

Since this is not simply to reject false superstitions, but to create new values and principles based upon reason. This outlook is not negative; it is positive and constructive. For its task is not to destroy but to build a better world, based upon knowledge, not presumption or falsehood. Ideas have powerful consequences; and the ideas and values of Rationalism and Humanism have already had far-reaching transforming effects. They have literally created the modern humanist world; and they will continue to do so in the future.

BS

*R.G.Rao (Somu) is the National Secretary
of Federation of Indian Rationalist
Associations*

**Religion is an illusion of childhood, outgrown under
proper education.**

Auguste Comte

From the President of FIRA

Narendra Nayak

As we enter the period of the hottest season, I need to report what we have done in the 40+ temperatures of Bihar! If we have managed to build up a new well organised state level movement in a very short time, it is in the state of Bihar and thanks to the Science for Society, Bihar and its well organised structure. Though one of the earliest executive committee meetings of FIRA was held at Patna the activity in that state had been zero until we got our links with the Science for Society, Bihar and that was by an accident.

Bihar & Uttar Pradesh

In Bihar in 2003, if I am right, there was a public function organized by the MP of Navada, Sanjay Paswan, who was also the minister for state for Science and Technology, Govt. of India. He had honored some Tantriks because he felt that they had divine powers by using which they could do miraculous things like holding snakes, walking on fire, swallowing fire etc. Enraged by this the director of the Patna Planetarium had invited Premanand to conduct a training program there, which he did very successfully. During that Prof. S.P.Verma had met Premanand and asked him to conduct training camps for his organization for the year of Scientific Awareness which was to be held in the year 2004. That training camp was held in June, 2004 and with that started our relationship with this organization Science for Society, Bihar. I have gone on many tours of Bihar afterwards sponsored by various organizations and also on my own. We have managed a net work of contacts



in almost every district through the units of Science for Society, Bihar and have also build up the same in Jharkhand with their unit of that state. Now, we are planning to have an organization for the promotion of rationalism at Bihar with branches in all districts. That may materialize within a year or so. We could start with Uttar Pradesh after that.

Why Bihar and Uttar Pradesh? These two are the most backward states in India. The infant mortality rates are quite shocking. The superstitions are appalling and no social political movement seems to be bothering about it. The main reason for this is the mindset of the people which makes them believe that these things are predestined! I was reading an interview with Belinda Gates of the Bill Gates foundation about these two states. This foundation would like to bring about a paradigmatic change in the thinking of the people in these two states. To get out of these mindsets is possible only if the people can be persuaded to change their very outlook and I do think that our activities are the best ways to do that. We are exploring the possibilities of tie ups with

these to do that. We are given to understand that this foundation usually works through the governmental agencies and we have been collaborating with quite a few of them in developing scientific temper. However that may be wishful thinking! But, we are taking concrete steps in this direction. We have been conducting quite a few training programs in Bihar and have now lined up some young activists. In the month of April we have had three training programs in which three people from each of the districts of the state have been taken and given a five day orientation on inculcating scientific temper among the people concentrating on the younger generation. In the month of June we have been invited for three such programs in Uttar Pradesh, in Lucknow, Bareilly and Moradabad. The details of these will be soon available. We are also planning for three more in the state of Bihar.

We have plans to call a meeting of interested groups in North India. The movement needs to be developed in the states of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh (the BIMARU states as they are usually called), The eastern states of Jharkhand and Orissa too need our attention as the superstitions there are quite appalling and life threatening. In Karnataka we have made beginning by calling a state level conference at Bangalore in March. We are now planning for divisional

conferences at Dharwar, Gulbarga and district level conferences at Mysore and Kodagu. In these days of the onslaught of superstitions in media needs an aggressive counter campaign by us to promote scientific temper.

We have training programs lined up at Bangalore and Vijayawada in this month. The Bangalore one is being organized by the Breakthrough Science Society while the Vijayawada one is by the Atheist Center. There is a one day interaction at the Science museum Chennai being organized by the Department of Science and Technology, Govt. of Tamilnadu. These were called as miracle exposure workshops but now we call them as workshops on developing scientific temper and we have also included many topics which are superstitions but cannot be called as miracles. These have become quite popular among activists of our movement and we need many activists to become trainers and start the chain reaction needed to sustain a movement on a larger scale. I am sorry to say that we have not made the sort of progress that should have been made. That may be due to a variety of reasons but unless the movement grows stronger our objectives will not be achieved at all. It is for all of us to introspect about that and bring about the much needed changes in our ways of thinking.

Religion is still parasitic in the interstices of our knowledge which have not yet been filled. Like bed-bugs in the cracks of walls and furniture, miracles lurk in the lacunae of science. The scientist plasters up these cracks in our knowledge; the more militant Rationalist swats the bugs in the open. Both have their proper sphere and they should realize that they are allies.

John Haldane

Science and Life: Essays of a Rationalist

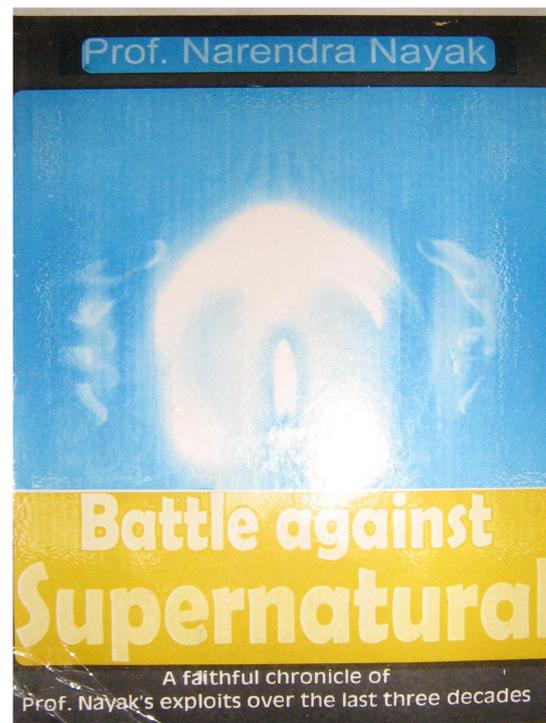


Rationalist in Action

Prabhakar Nanawaty

It is generally presumed that most of the rationalists are easy chair philosophers who never bother about what is happening in and around their surroundings. But this may not be true. There are many rationalists in present day India who are confronting the superstitious elements in the society and while doing so, are being harassed for their noble deed. Amongst such rationalists who are actively participating in the movement and agitations against superstitions and godmen claiming supernatural powers, **Prof Narendra Nayak** appears to be a star performer. Almost for last three decades he is striving hard to imbibe scientific temper in the society by involving himself in the rationalist movement and contributing articles and letters to various periodicals and daily news papers describing his views and happenings in the field of rationalism. His book ***“Battle against Supernatural”*** is a compilation of such articles, and letters written by him while confronting the superstitions prevailing in the society.

Barring a few, each and every page in this book is an eye opener to the activists working in this area. Author’s multifaceted activities, his involvement in confronting the godmen in spite of risks involved, his strong views on the strategies to be adapted to progress rationalist movement further will be highly appreciated as one turns the pages. In fact he had many things



to say and would have elaborated further on the issues involved. As such most of the articles are very short (and precise) due to the limitations imposed by the print media and responses given by the media at that juncture. He might have been forced to cut short what he wanted to say. The writings included in this book have been written during the period 1988 to 2006. The writings contain aspects like Satya Sai Baba (Aka Satya Narayan Raju as author wants to address him!) Mata Amritanand Mayi (Aka Sudhamani!), Benny Hill, an evangelist, Art of Living fame Sri Sri (!) Ravishankar, Kalki Bhagwan cult, psychic surgeon Alex Orbito of Philippines, Radha

Swami Satsang Beas (RSSB), astrology, future predictions, dowsing, misleading ads on nutrition, search for ESP, efficacy of cow's urine, conversions, quack medicines like electrotherapy, electro homeo-therapy, magneto therapy, reflexology, color therapy, gem therapy, Reiki, pranic healing, acupuncture, aroma therapy etc, misleading pendulum diagnosis, divine miracle exposure demonstrations, haunted houses, exposure of poltergeist, spiritualism, snake myth (related to sale of motorbike!) etc. Though the book makes very interesting reading, at the same time one will feel sympathy for the gullible public. As author modifies the quote of P.T. Bernum, it is true

– known as lidenfrost effect – is explained. He has also publicly exposed the outrageous claims of miracle men and godmen. His mission appears to be divine miracle exposure campaign.

Like B Premanand, Prof Narendra Nayak has also written many articles and letters exposing Satya Sai Baba of Puttpurthy. In spite of stark evidences of murder, cheating, exploitation, quackery, trickery, etc this so called godman is still flourishing and attracting thousands of innocent devotees and amassing wealth. Prof Nayak describes incident of Lokayya Pujari's murder in the premises of a school run by



There are many rationalists in present day India who are confronting the superstitious elements in the society and while doing so, are being harassed for their noble deed. Amongst such rationalists who are actively participating in the movement and agitations against superstitions and godmen claiming supernatural powers, **Prof Narendra Nayak** appears to be a star performer.

that there are 100 suckers born every second in India!

As B Premanand puts on the book's blurb, Prof Narendra Nayak has actively spearheaded a crusade against superstitions often at great personal risk. He has debunked many a so called 'myth', miracles and ghost story. As a part of divine miracle exposure campaign Pro Nayak might have participated in hundreds of demos which involve materialization of *Vibhuti* from seemingly empty palm, lighting of fire in a *yagnya kunda* by yogic power, piercing of the tongue by a sharp pointed *trishul*. He not only demonstrates the trick as being claimed by the tricksters but also explains the scientific principle behind such miracles. There is a so called miracle of flame putting in the mouth. The scientific principle of the process by which a layer of water vapor protects the skin from burning

Satya Sai Lokshikshan Trust, which carries on the cult activities of brain washing the students to believe in the godhood of Satya Sai Baba. Though there was hue and cry in the local press no one was punished and the case was mysteriously closed by the bigwigs in the power to please their godman. In one of the letters written to the editor of Sunday weekly, Calcutta, Prof Nayak challenges Satya Sai Baba and his cronies to produce any object that Nayak asks for within 30 seconds, teleport an exact replica of a one rupee currency note which is placed in a sealed envelope, convert 5 litres of water in a sealed can to petrol, and disappear from the negative of the photograph taken along with him. . Obviously none came forward to exhibit their supernatural powers. Prof Nayak blames the media for their irresponsible attitude to glorify the charlatan like Satya Sai Baba.

Similarly Prof Nayak exposes the hoax of Kalki Bhagwan and describes the cult promoted by Kalki Bhagwan and his wife as one of those extortionist organizations aimed at exploiting the innocent and filling their coffers.

Mata Amritanandmayi is one more familiar name in Indian spiritual (as well as philanthropic!) world, for her hugging blessings and huge 'donations' to the 'social cause'. Prof Nayak traces her childhood history and her 'miraculous power' like lighting lamps without oil, curing a leper by sucking the pus and licking the wound (new medicine for leprosy!), multiplication of food etc. If her

The book contains many examples of this nature including local godmen like pilot baba, Varadaraj Pai etc. sometimes you feel very sad while reading these anecdotes which exploit the poor, common people making poor more poorer and rich more richer.

Readers will be quite amused while reading the articles and letters written by the author on astrology and its downright absurd, tall claims. Prof Nayak has a very good sense of humour since he challenges the astrologers every time whenever they advertise in the press. Prof Nayak promises them Rs 50,000 and his personal belongings who testifies his claims and



Ravishankar claims that though his Sudarshan Kriya Yoga cannot make a poor man rich but it can make him happier man (without changing his economic status!). In fact for this social service, his cronies want him to be nominated for Noble peace prize.

supernatural power is really working, all the problems of this country will be solved within no time. The 'Divine' mother has a very long list of celebrities and political leaders as her followers. Rationalists like Prof Nayak may challenge her but their challenge will be in vain and will never be accepted.

Art of Living fame Sri Sri (?) Ravi Shankar - a disciple of world famous (notorious!) TM specialist Mahesh Yogi - claims that he is doing social service. According to Prof Nayak his so called social service is a fraud of the highest order. His Sudarshan Kriya Yoga claims that though it cannot make a poor man rich but it can make him happier man (without changing his economic status!). In fact for this social service, his cronies want him to be nominated for Noble peace prize.

proves it in front of an independent committee. No one has so far come forward to claim this amount and Prof Nayak still owns his personal belongings! He also challenges and announces the reward of Rs 50000 to the election result predictors to guess the results in advance before counting date. So far no one has guessed the results perfectly. The prize money is still in tact though a number of elections took place during this period. In one of his letters to press, he takes a case of demotion of planet Pluto and discusses the effect on so called 'astrological science'. He comments on astrologers' habit of mixing astrology and astronomy and pretend that they can predict changes in human lives.

Prof Nayak narrates an instance of Valmiki Hanumanthrayappa of Tumkur district of

Karnataka who claims that due to power blessed by Shani (Saturn) he can name the playing cards without actually seeing them. Prof Nayak makes a fool of him in public by exposing his Saturn power. At the end he agreed that he never had any such powers. Going by Hanumanthrayappa's version, he is a much sought-after person in clubs and gambling dens. He had saved many from bankruptcy by predicting the cards with blessings of "*Shanidevaru*".

Prof Nayak had come across many quacks in his life time; some of them faith healers, some performing bloodless surgery, some diagnosing using pendulum, etc. Alex Orbito of Philippines, a faith healer, claimed that not only sending the divine

such jinx by the placebo effect of any therapy. But in many cases faith healing can be dangerous. However the faith healers make money out of patients' misery. Alex Orbito is said to have decamped with about a crore and half rupees collected from gullible people, many of whom hailed from economically weaker sections.

Benny Hinn is one more faith healer, an evangelist claiming that prayers can cure any disease including AIDs. The business of Benny Hinn, a multimillionaire with a fleet of jets, personal bodyguards and open display of wealth proves that what a good business religion can be. Benny Hinn's arrival and his prayer meetings used to irk

Benny Hinn is one more faith healer, an evangelist claiming that prayers can cure any disease including AIDs. The business of Benny Hinn, a multimillionaire with a fleet of jets, personal bodyguards and open display of wealth proves that what a good business religion can be.

vibrations but also operating upon patients and removing parts without a drop of blood or pain. His hands enter the abdomen area of a patient and draws tumours and such evil forces. During the surgery there is no pain, no antiseptic, no anesthesia, and the bleeding is minimal. The crowd gathered is impressed. If rationalist like Narendra Nayak tries to intervene, he will be thrown out by force. However Prof Nayak demonstrated this trick on TV. The viewers consisting of doctors and medical students were struck with awe.

While explaining the theory behind such quack medicine and alternate and complimentary therapies, Prof Nayak remarks that the so called cures work only with psychosomatic disorders and self-limiting illness. One can get relief from

BJP and Sangh Pariwar. BJP claimed that he is here for mass conversion of Hindus to Christians through prayers during faith healing session without substantiating their statement. . Hence Sangh Pariwar wanted that rationalists should join them to condemn Benny Hinn. Hackles of Sangh Pariwar were the impertinence of a *videshi* trying to get into their business or rather their domain. Prof Nayak states that it is not understood as to why a country with 33 crore indigenous gods require a foreigner to come and pray for us! Every time faith healers have been challenged they have taken to their heels without accepting the challenge on one or the other pretext.

In one of his articles Narendra Nayak criticizes the VHP-BJP-RSS gang for promoting cow's urine as a cure all. The

racket of selling the distillate of cow's urine for Rs 100 per litre! The gang claimed that it is a panacea – a cure for 148 diseases and a cure all – *sarva roga nivarini!* In fact cow's urine distillate has been granted patent no 6410059 by the US Patent Office! However saffron gang proclaims virtues of cow – not any cow but the Indian cow to be precise. The whole article makes a worth reading which describes the ingredients of urine its ill effect. Even author questions why not dog's milk. He pooh poohs the idea of *Shivambu* – drinking ones own urine. After reading such articles one can conclude that you can fool all the people all the time!

Prof Nayak is not only an ardent rationalist but also a consumer activist. He had included a few articles on this subject viz; nutritional ads, proliferation of spiritual channels, orphanage racket, spiritualism as business etc. These articles make us aware of the greed of the concerned and how we as a consumer are being fooled.

Though most of the writings included in this chronicle are field experiences, there are a few thought provoking articles too. His comments on Naxalite movement, Superstitions as retardant of progress, Evaluation of spiritualism, Religious (in)tolerance, Challenges faced by rationalist movement, etc are very apt and makes us to think further. Prof Narendra Nayak reveals a plan of action for rationalist movement. This includes to

develop a strong database, share the knowledge, investigate the phenomena, challenge the claimants, build support base, organize, use the media, react fast, set an example and do get involved.

With all his experience in the field and expertise on various aspects of rationalism author still feels that “have we managed to end the irrationalism inherent in people steeped with superstitions of centuries? Have we made the people more aware of scientific analysis of things before accepting them? The question is rather an open one. It is for us to see the challenges in the very broad perspective in terms of challenges for the next two decades; if not for longer while. “

Readers of the book will no doubt agree with these sentiments expressed by the author and act accordingly!

Battle against Supernatural
Prof Narendra Nayak

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**God is necessary to those who need a crutch, to
those who'll go mad without this crutch.**

B.Premanand

Science versus Miracles

Bangalore Vicharavadi Sangha

(Bangalore Rationalist Association)

Bangalore Vicharavadi Sangha conducts monthly lectures and discussions on various topics. Those who are interested in attending the programmes conducted by the association may contact:

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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.

- Try not to get overly attached to a hypothesis just because it's yours. It's only a way station in the pursuit of knowledge. Ask yourself why you like the idea. Compare it fairly with the alternatives. See if you can find reasons for rejecting it. If you don't, others will.

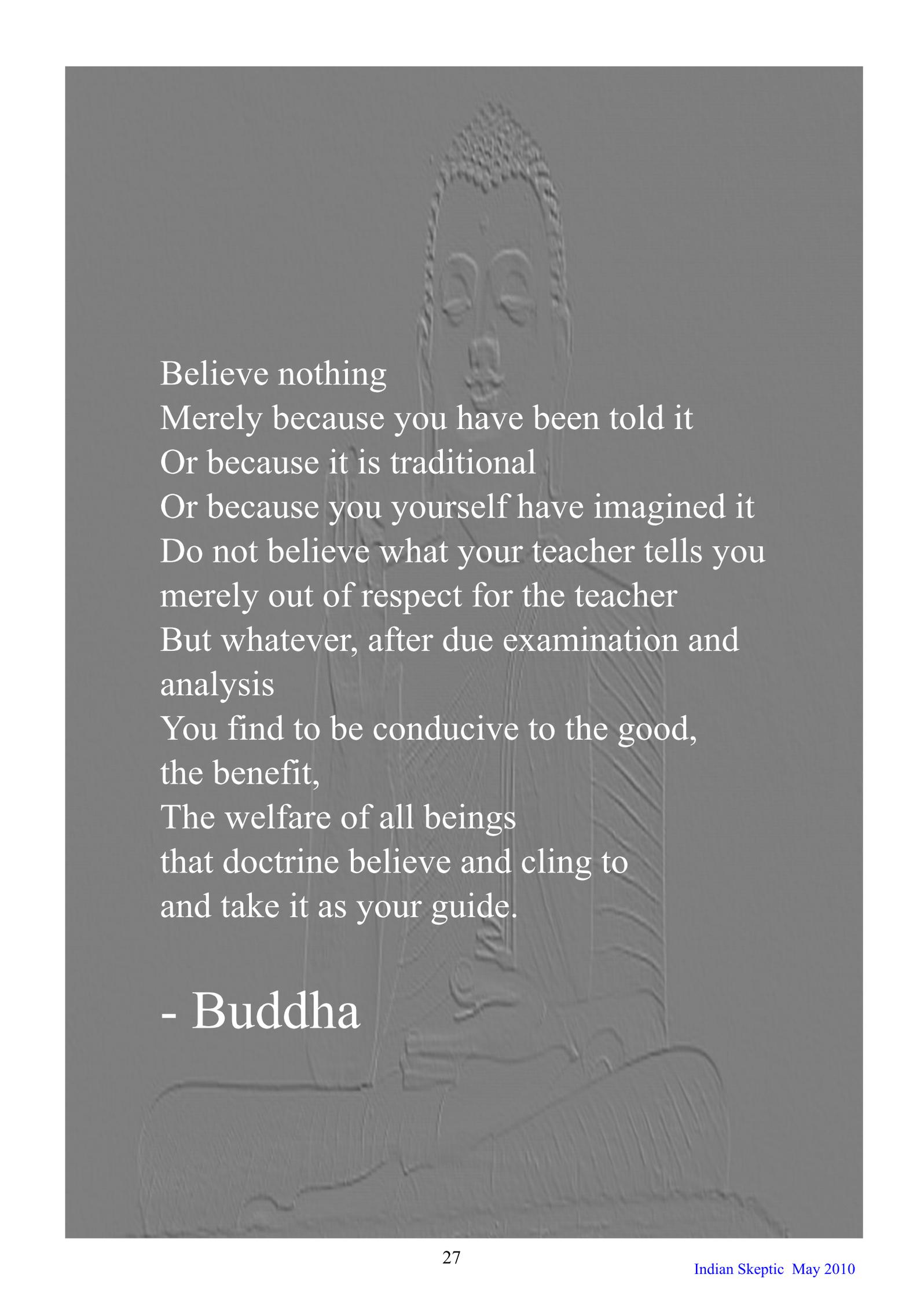


- Quantify. If whatever it is you're explaining has some measure, some numerical quantity attached to it, you'll be much better able to discriminate among competing hypotheses. What is vague and qualitative is open to many explanations. Of course there are truths to be sought in the many qualitative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