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REFLECTIONS

chanakya



DON'T LET 'GODMEN' FLOAT ABOVE THE FRAY

Awondrous fact as far as I am concerned is that at the tender age of 14 Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh allegedly had his first child — his daughter is today 36 to his 50. But I am being facetious. His age is clearly yet another falsehood propagated by the fake spiritual leader along with his divine qualities.

By now we know all about his chicanery, his political support, his sleazy behaviour, his appalling taste. We have arraigned him on one side those who say the BJP allowed him to flourish and another which says he flourished under earlier governments. The Khattar government is trying to take credit for bringing him down. But, let us be clear, it did not. A fearless judiciary did.

The point that needs to be stressed if such incidents are to be prevented in future is how such states within states are allowed to flourish. Granted the people are superstitious, venal politicians will try and use them. But these ashrams like that of Ashutosh Maharaj, Asaram Babu, Osho and of course Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh to name only a very few did not spring up overnight in isolation.

They have all come up in fairly well-populated areas and over the years the land they have got has increased exponentially. I am not saying

all of it was encroached upon, but certainly Singh did not acquire all his property legally. There was much coercion and force for people to sign over the land, public spaces were often taken over for the so-called godman's meetings, state facilities were misused and yet no one seems to have known how this man and others like him could become such potentates, laws unto themselves with followers willing to take on the might of the State.

Why, I would like to know, are things left till it is too late? Till the supporters of these charlatans acquired the power and arms to attack the police and impose their own laws in their deras and ashrams. Are these places not governed by the law of the land? Let us take the Singh case again. This man apparently amassed a vast stock of lethal weaponry right under the noses of the authorities and no one was the wiser? Pull the other one, it's got bells on.

The talk of him preying on women and castrating men was well known, but the authorities are suddenly patting themselves on the back for bringing him to book. They did not, the fearless efforts of the victims and a vigorous judiciary did. If the authorities knew nothing of all this, I can only conclude that they are incompetent at best or complicit at worst.

There is no rule that the authorities cannot enter these premises presided over by self-styled



Illustration: SUDHIR SHETTY

spiritual gurus though in the case of Singh, it is unclear what exactly he portrayed himself as. An attempt to project himself as an incarnation of Guru Gobind Singh came a cropper with a fatwa being issued against him by various Sikh bodies. Most of these places get large quantities of donations in cash. That alone should have been cause for the authorities to keep an eye on them. They may be exempted from tax but surely they are not allowed to hoard cash and gold on the premises or have offshore accounts. When the Sai Baba died or moved onto another life if you will, a huge stash of gold was found in the ashram, truckloads of cash were intercepted moving out of the premises. Ordinary people get put in jail and the key thrown away for much

less financial impropriety. It is clear that in all these ashrams, the authorities deliberately or otherwise looked the other way when these were expanding. This gave these fake godmen the ability to use their numbers and wealth to dictate their own terms. And for a mealy-mouthed political class to shy away from doing its job, but instead to try and cash in on the support these organisations could bring to the table come elections. None of this is unknown; there have been countless stories of hapless people who were made off by them; they could not refuse by the henchmen of people like Gurmeet Singh. It would appear that one such victim was the former husband of his adopted daughter Honeypreet Insan. It would be

a pity if we were to see a repeat of the kind of violence that the Dera supporters wreaked on public property and caused the death of 38 people from their ranks. There have been many instances where sheer muscle power and weapons have held off people, including the authorities from doing their job — that of ensuring that the law is not being violated in these ashrams.

It is not my contention that people not be allowed to set up ashrams and cater to the emotional and spiritual needs of those so inclined. I am saying that they are not above the law. They have to comply with land regulations, building bylaws, financial regulations and while on the subject, why on earth should they be exempted from tax? They should be given no concession that the average Joe does not get.

I think if the law were to apply strictly to these ashrams and deras, we would see a lot fewer of them springing up. The very attraction so far is that they can function below the radar and invoke their divinity when asked to be accountable.

Today, spiritual organisations have become vast money-spinners operating outside the law. Whether it is the Christian evangelical sects we see in places like Kerala, Muslim bodies headed by pirs or pseudo-spiritual organisations like Gurmeet's Singh's, they are all guilty of breaking a plethora of laws.

Just apply the law of the land and I can assure you there will be a sharp drop in new ashrams and followers. Just withdraw the carte blanche given to these fake spiritual leaders of all hues. It is a lot less expensive and painful than dealing with them after they have mutated into mega outfits like the Dera Sacha Sauda did.

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sundaysentiments



KARAN THAPAR

TRUMP'S THREATS RING HOLLOW TO PAKISTAN

Donald Trump's stinging criticism of Pakistan, rebuking the country for providing safe havens to terrorists and demanding immediate change, has understandably, gladdened hearts in New Delhi, but what are the chances this American president will succeed where his predecessors repeatedly tried and failed to change Pakistani policies perceived to be of national interest? Not bright, is the best one can say.

For a start, this won't be the first time America has threatened to cut aid to Pakistan. In fact, there are at least two occasions in the past when it actually did but that failed to alter Islamabad's behaviour.

American aid first picked up in the mid-1950s, after Pakistan joined US-led military alliances, touching \$3 billion in 1963 and then fell to virtually zero in 1980, in the wake of American concerns about Islamabad's nuclear weapons

programme. However, Pakistan's nuclear ambitions did not change and this was, therefore, the first time an aid cut didn't work.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan changed everything and US aid was restored. It was virtually one billion right through the '80s. But in the 1990s, after the Soviet retreat from Afghanistan and George Bush the elder's refusal to certify Pakistan did not possess nuclear weapons, American aid collapsed. But, again, Pakistani behaviour was unaffected.

Once again, 9/11 altered everything. Since then Pakistan has received more than \$30 billion. But are things likely to be different this time?

No and for one simple reason. America's Afghanistan involvement reinforces US dependence on Pakistan for its supply lines. As American troop levels in Afghanistan surge Pakistan's leverage over Washington will simultane-



A protest against US President Donald Trump, Karachi, August 25 AFP

ously grow. In these circumstances it's hard to see Trump cut US aid.

However, for argument's sake, let's suppose Trump is determined to act. In that event how much will a reduction in US aid affect Pakistan? Last year remittances from Pakistani expatriate workers totalled \$19.8 billion. In comparison, the well-informed Congressional Research Service estimates that US aid amounted to \$1.098 billion.

No wonder Pakistan's army chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, responded dismissively to the possibility that Trump could cut financial support.

"We are not looking for any material or financial assistance from the USA," he said. Indeed, it's quite possible his country could carry on comfortably without it.

The same is also increasingly true of the arms and weaponry Pakistan acquires from America. No doubt the United States has supplied F16 fighter planes, P3 Orion aircraft and AH-1F Cobra helicopters but, increasingly, a preponderant proportion of Pakistani arms are Chinese made. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute believes that nearly 70% of its military supplies between 2012 and 2016 came from China. Once again, US leverage has diminished.

America, of course, has enormous kinetic power which it could unleash. Washington could directly target jihadi bases by using its drones or, even, some repeat of the strategy to take out Osama bin Laden. But this would infuriate the Pakistani army and inflame public opinion. That's why it's unlikely to happen while US involvement in Afghanistan is dependent upon Pakistani supply-lines.

Finally, Trump had nothing specific to say about Pakistani terror groups, like the Lashkar and Jaish, which target India. At best, they were covered generically. If he is serious about reforming this prodigal ally we should also question his silence on this front.

The views expressed are personal

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LALITA PANICKER

WOMEN ARE AT RISK IN SPIRITUAL COMMUNES

Fifteen years seems an agonisingly long time for a rape victim to get justice. Today, we are revelling in the fact that justice has been done but if you look back at how long it took for the complaints of the two victims to bring Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh to his knees, you can imagine the fear and horror they must have lived in all these years. And what happened to all the other young women whom he preyed on and whose voices either could not be raised against him or were disregarded by the very people who should have protected them and taken them out of harm's way.

In so many cases, these so-called godmen usually target the young and vulnerable, in most cases children and women, as part of their efforts to consolidate their grip on their empires. In the Asaram Babu case, young boys mysteriously vanished from his ashram, a few were found murdered and the fate of many others is still unknown even though the charlatan was caught eventually. I found it particularly heart-rending that the young woman whose case got the most attention in the Singh case spoke of his deprecations to her family but no one either believed her or were too scared to take on the might of the rapist.

Most of these spiritual leaders seem to, if nothing else, understand the human psyche, especially that of women, much more than we give them credit for. If a marginalised community finds validation in these cults, within the marginalised, the very lowest tend to be women. Illiteracy and irrelevance is what often leads them to believe in the fakery and chicanery of these people.

In a world where they are voiceless, they often come to these cults in the hopes of a better life for their families, some safety for their children and menial jobs for their husbands. In this illusory world, they believe that the spiritual leader will give them the

crumbs that society cannot or will not afford them. This creates a dependency syndrome which very often turns into a hostage like situation. So pervasive is the fear of the 'guru' that, as the woman in the Singh case said, she feared that she would be hunted down and killed if she tried to escape. The ruse that women were being purified by Singh's sexual assaults was actually the opening gambit for his sexual predation.

The sacrifice of women is also part of the payback to the provider and families are complicit in willingly or otherwise think that this is a price worth paying for financial and social security. And I refuse to believe that the state thought that Singh was pure as the driven snow when it came to his conduct with women. They did not think it worth their while to keep a check on this man even though a few women did escape over the years and told their harrowing stories. I cannot imagine the plight of those trapped in these sects who have been brainwashed into believing that their tormentors cannot be touched by the law or indeed that a great favour is being bestowed on them through sexual violence.

It is incumbent upon the authorities to conduct checks on the health and welfare of women in these cults. Even in ashrams presided over by women; other women are victims of the sexual advances of powerful men in the inner coteries which is often accompanied by violence. Given the numerous instances which have come to light, the least that state authorities and the police can do is to ensure greater vigilance over these deras and ashrams where a number of women live in close proximity with men who are in powerful positions and on whom they are dependent for their sustenance. Singh's dera is just one of the thousands of cults that exist across India. Now there is no excuse to overlook the safety of women and children who live in them.

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deepcut



RAJESH MAHAPATRA

IF RBI DIDN'T, WHO WENT FOR NOTE BAN? AND WHY?

Former Reserve Bank governor Raghuram Rajan has finally broken his silence. In his latest book — I do what I do — Rajan confirms that at no point until his term ended on September 3 last year did the RBI conclude a decision on demonetisation.

This revelation, coupled with data released by the government and the RBI over the past week, reaffirms what critics of demonetisation have long argued: That it was not only implemented without adequate preparations but, significantly as well, there was no compelling economic rationale for such a disruptive measure.

The growth of the broader economy has, in fact, slowed sharply from 7% in October-December 2016 to 6.1% in January-March and 5.7% in April-June quarter of 2017. The impacts of the cash squeeze and disruptions following the November 8 shock-and-awe decision to scrap high-value banknotes are far

from over. Consumer spending continues to be weak and businesses remain wary of making new investments. A sharp turnaround for the economy is unlikely to happen soon.

My colleague Manas Chakravarty at Mint has illustrated this well, pointing to the declining contribution of private consumption spending to GDP growth: From 66.2% in January-March to 62.3% in April-June of this year. This fall was more than offset in the April-June quarter by a sharp increase in government spending, which is unlikely to sustain. The fiscal deficit in the first four months of FY 2017-18 has already touched 92.4% of the annual target, making the government vulnerable to pressures from international rating agencies and leaving it with little headroom to spend more to boost demand in coming months.

Rajan, as it turns out, was correct in advising the government that the

FORMER RBI GOVERNOR RAGHURAM RAJAN'S BOOK SUGGESTS THE GOVERNMENT CHOSE TO IGNORE THE COLLECTIVE WISDOM AND CAUTIONS ADVANCED BY THE CENTRAL BANK

"short-term economic costs" of demonetisation would outweigh any longer-term benefits. The RBI under his watch even went to the extent of preparing a note, which listed out in detail the pros and cons of demonetisation, the alternatives available and the preparations that would be needed if the government still chose to go ahead. The central bank also flagged what would happen if the requisite logistics were not in place.

These disclosures by the former governor — we are hearing for the first time — make it clear that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government chose to ignore the collective wisdom and numerous cautions advanced by the RBI.

It is also evident that the note-ban decision, billed as India's biggest ever assault on black money, hasn't had much impact on either the stock of illegal cash or its flow. Official data, available now, shows 99% of the ₹15.46 lakh crore held in denominations of ₹1000

and ₹500 have returned to the banking system — meaning hoarders of black money found a way to legitimise most of their dodgy cash.

What then were the compulsions that drove the decision for demonetisation? Even as the RBI in its measured judgement remained unconvinced that a shock withdrawal of high-value notes, which were worth 86% of the cash in circulation, would be effective in addressing the stated goals of checking corruption, counterfeit currency and terror funding.

Who advised the government to go for demonetisation? Were the other alternatives suggested by the central bank duly considered? If the decision was made after September 3, as Rajan indicates, what were the reasons to rush it through?

The above questions now carry the full weight of being India's most intriguing political puzzle of recent years. As the economic pain worsens in the coming days, the demand for the answers to the 'who' and 'what' of demonetisation will only grow louder.

It is in the interest of the government to come clean and transparent on this, at the earliest. Failing which, all the ingredients for a politically and economically damaging scandal are in the air. Governments, as history will tell us, in the absence of facts and truths can be brutally punished by rumour, innuendo and speculation.

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PICTURE OF THE WEEK

SEPT 6: LN Birla (Left), FICCI president, at a seminar on economic growth through agricultural and industrial interdependence



NEWS OF THE WEEK

INDIA
KASHMIRI PANDITS SUSPEND AGITATION
SEPT 4: Kashmiri Pandits suspended their month-old agitation today (Sept 3) after an agreement with the Kashmir Government on their demands. Union Home Minister YB Chavan's intervention led to the agreement.

WORLD
THIEU WINS SAIGON POLL
SEPT 4: Chief of State Lt-Gen. Nguyen Van Thieu was elected President of South Vietnam today (Sept 3). Election officials announced that 83 per cent of the country's 5,853,251 registered voters went to the polls in today's balloting.

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sundayletters

INDIA NEEDS MORE LEADERS LIKE RISHANG KEISHING

Ramachandra Guha in The Naga search for peace with honour (Past & Present, August 27) has enlightened the readers by writing about the late Rishang Keishing, a great leader from the Northeast. Guha recollects how Keishing was a humanist par excellence who did not shy away from pointing out the mistakes made by both the government and rebels. It is unfortunate that many living in 'mainland' India know little about the Northeast, leave alone its leaders. India today needs leaders like Keishing who can act like a bridge between the people and the State.

SAMIUL HASSAN QUADRI BIKANER

The world of the radio is infinite

This is with reference to Mark Tully's in the age of TV, the radio still has a special charm (August 27). As rightly put by the author, there is no substitute for the radio. Unlike television, the radio is one medium one can enjoy while at ease — listen to it with closed eyes and a new world appears in front of you. While FM radio stations have increased it is a loss that radio markets have vanished from our cities. But, the world of the radio is infinite.

MAHESH KAPASI NEW DELHI

Unsung heroes in our lives

It is very thoughtful of Karan Thapar to write about his chef-housekeeper in 'I'll miss Umed for the rest of my life' (Sunday Sentiments, August 27). Many never appreciate how well our housekeepers look after us. We cannot fight life's everyday battles without the quiet support of people like Umed. Truly they are the 'unsung heroes'.

VUJAI PANT VIA EMAIL

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