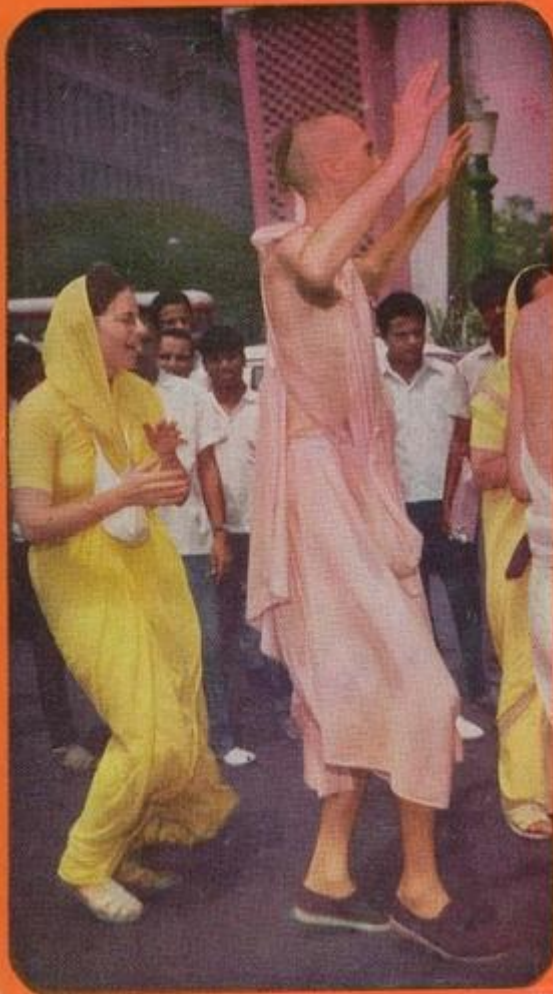


Gurus, Godmen And Good People

Khushwant Singh



Sathya Sai Baba

Acharya Rajneesh

Anandamayee Ma

Nirankaris

Maharishi Mahesh Yogi

Neelakantha Tathaji

Radhasoamis

Dattabal

Balyogeshwar Maharajji

Swami Prabhupada

Swami Muktanandaji

Mother Teresa

ORIENT LONGMAN LTD.

Regd. Office :

3/5 Asaf Ali Road, New Delhi 110 001

Branch Offices :

Kamani Marg, Ballard Estate, Bombay 400 038
17 Chittaranjan Avenue, Calcutta 700 013
36 A, Anna Salai, Mount Road, Madras 600 002
1/24 Asaf Ali Road, New Delhi 110 001
80/1 Mahatma Gandhi Road, Bangalore 560 001
3-5-820, Hyderguda, Hyderabad 500 001

First published 1975

© Orient Longman Ltd.

Printed by

S. J. Patwardhan, Sangam Press Ltd., 17 B Kothrud
Poona 411 029

Published by

Priya Adarkar, Orient Longman Ltd.
Kamani Marg, Ballard Estate
Bombay 400 038

Introduction mentioning Dadaji; please purchase book to read full content.

Gurus, Godmen and Good People

The climate of India has always been productive of Prophets and Messiahs. Every age has had its quota of men and women claiming kinship with God; some even claiming to be His human reincarnations. Neither the march of science nor the spread of Marxist atheism has made the slightest impact on the widespread belief in the spiritual powers and missions of these gods in human form. To understand the Indian mind you have to understand what their gurus and Godmen mean to them.

There are many self-styled *Bhagwans* (Gods), *Swamis* (Lords), *Rishis* (Sages), *Maharishis* (Great Sages), *Acharyas* (Teachers) and *Sants* (Saints) and Gurus with large followings. It is not possible to make an estimate of their numbers because wildly exaggerated claims are made by each one of them. But it can be assumed that most religious Hindus and Sikhs (together making 85% of the population of India) and some Muslims, Christians and Parsis as well, pay homage to some living saint or the other whom they regard as God incarnate.

Why Gurus flourish more in India than in any other country has been explained by Peter Brent in his *Godmen of India* (Penguins). He writes, "In the West, we are free to work for the approval of those we love and respect and whom we would like to love and respect us. Not so the Indians. . . For Indians, particularly those of the middle classes," says Brent, "there are only two directions they can go to prove that they can love, and be loved. One is towards homosexuality, the other towards the Guru—the two not being mutually exclusive."

According to Brent, Indians cultivate intimate relations with

Gurus because there are traditional inhibitions against mingling of sexes and the tyranny of fathers. The young Indian male may not indulge in love "or even look at girls of his own class, but can form the most passionate friendship and express it with caresses with his guru." Furthermore, the guru-disciple relationship "is in some ways an ideal version of that which should exist between father and son but does not." The Guru, though the father-figure, is the rescuer from the real father's dominance. "He is the father who has been chosen; in this way, the disciple remains free in his bondage, bound in his freedom."

Brent concedes that there is more to the Guru-disciple relationship than "frustrated sexuality or the psychological wounds inflicted by over-authoritarian fathers". He goes on to explode the facile assumption that the Guru is the Indian version of the psychoanalyst. One is a teacher, the other a doctor; one deals with spiritual aspirations, the other with the psychologically maimed; one strives to take away his disciple from the world which according to him is illusory, unreal; the other attempts to readjust him to it. The final success of one would be considered the ultimate failure of the other. An Indian who explodes "*Aham Brahmasmi*" (I am God) has achieved his goal. A Westerner who makes even a lesser claim, "I am Bonaparte", would be locked up in a lunatic asylum.

* * *

Though there is nothing new in the teachings of the Godmen for the Indians, they have been drawing more attention because of the publicity they receive in the European and the American press. "Going to Phoren" (Foreign) has become a part of the Indians' one-upmanship; Godmen are no exception. And foreign devotees have become an important status symbol. They are paraded before the Indians as proof-positive that at long last the materialistic West is turning to spiritual India for guidance.

The techniques recommended by the Godman are the same as practised by the gurus over the centuries. First comes the initiation. Once the neophyte is considered fit to be enrolled the Guru gives him the *Diksha* (spiritual gift) of a sacred *mantra* whispered in the ear. This may be just one word like the name of one of the gods, Rama or Krishna, or a verse; "Repeat the name of Shiva

and your difficulties will be resolved". This is the *Guru Mantra*, the secret bond between Guru and disciple which must never be divulged. The devotee must thereafter meditate in absolute silence and still his wavering mind by repeating the *Guru Mantra* to himself. He should focus his inner vision on a spot between the eyes above the nose and regulate his breathing. The practice is designed to open the mystic third eye through which divine light comes flooding in. It can be a long process. But some Gurus like Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (one-time Guru of the Beatles) claim to have evolved a mode of instant meditation. Mahesh Yogi's technique is held at a discount by practitioners of the art.

Most Gurus recommend practices in which the disciple can drop his or her inhibitions and let themselves go. Although drugs and drink are forbidden, chanting, singing and dancing that produce a sense of euphoria leading to a trance are approved. At some of these seances, disciples discard their clothing, shriek, leap about wildly and pass out.

Peter Brent interviewed many devotees and asked them to describe their experiences. A young American disciple said it was "like your mind is immersed in a thick sea of honey .. like jumping into a bathtub full of vaseline .. and you have this warm, warm, thick feeling all through you .." The Guru, continued the American disciple, appears as if "he's got like great teats all over him and we just suck and suck the heavy goodness out of him".

I put the same question to a pretty Italian girl, Grazia Marciano of Parma who has become a devotee of *Bhagwan* (God) Shri Rajneesh, the head of the neo-Sannyas International. "Life had become meaningless. I could not find the answer in conventional religion," she replied. "My adventure into meditation started by the surrender of my ego, my I-ness, my desire to be someone. It culminated in a magical moment when there was just awareness, peace, a deep cosmic feeling."

When he feels his end is near, the Guru nominates a successor. In Indian religious terminology this is "as one lamp lights another".

The man chosen is usually the closest disciple. But when money or property (ashrams, temples, land and houses) are involved, it is not unusual for the father to name his son (as in the case of Shri Guru Maharaj Ji) or relatives and thus keep the guruship

and the property in the family. Disputes about succession result in schisms and often come up before Courts of Law.

* * *

All over India one comes across pictures of a wizened old man sitting on a slab of stone with one leg on the other. This is Sai Baba of Shirdi, a latter-day Saint Christopher of India. Miniature shrines with Sai Baba figurines can be seen in niches in the bazars, hung on tree-trunks and draped with fresh marigold garlands. Cab-drivers have Sai Baba medallions on their dashboards; lots of people wear them in their necklace.

Sai Baba of Shirdi died more than fifty years ago. Eight years later his spirit entered the body of a young boy, Satyanarayana Raju, of the village of Puttaparthi (District Anantapur). He began to perform miracles and was soon acclaimed as the incarnation of the Shirdi Sai Baba.

Sathya Sai Baba has a bigger following than any of the contemporary Godmen of India. Wherever he goes, people flock to him in their hundreds of thousands to have his *darshan*. In the cities, his arrival snarls up traffic on the roads for many hours. Next to Indira Gandhi, he is the biggest draw.

Sathya Sai Baba sports a shock of curly hairs which sit on his head like a black halo. He drapes his body from his shoulders to his feet in a flaming saffron robe. He performs miracles with a wave of his hand; from the air he produces *vibhuti* (sacred ash), wrist-watches (made not in heaven but in Switzerland), rosaries and rings with his pictures. (Kenneth Keating, lately U.S. Ambassador in India, wears one which Sathya Sai Baba reduced to the right size by simply blowing through it.) At least once a year, he regurgitates *shivalingas* (phallic emblems made of stone). Howard Murphet, an Australian disciple, has made a long catalogue of miracles performed by this miracle-man in his biography *Sai Baba: Man of Miracles* (Macmillan). These include healing the sick and even bringing the dead to life.

Sathya Sai Baba has brought solace to many people. The late Dr K. M. Munshi, one-time Minister of Central Government, described him as a "God-possessed individual who plants the seed of faith in men—a seed which, when it blossoms, will liberate men from greed, hate and fear."

Another miracle-man who has a startling resemblance to Sathya Sai Baba, growing the same bee-hive mop of hair and wearing the same body length saffron robe is the thirty-seven year old *Bhagwan* (God) Sri Neelakantha Tathaji. When I went to pay my respects to him he "materialised" sacred ash and a brown berry out of the air.

I asked him how he came to acquire these supernatural powers. He did not remember the precise moment when the divine spirit entered his bodily frame but other people noticed strange phenomena about him. When he put his hand on the forehead of a man down with fever, the fever left him. When he touched the gangrenous leg of a man on his way to the hospital to have it amputated, the gangrene disappeared. A devotee sitting beside me whispered in my ear: "My heart had stopped beating: I was dead. The Baba gave me a second life. Can't you see he is divine? Look, there is a light round his head!" I looked. Did I see a halo round the Baba's head?

Similar miracles were performed by Dadaji. I was introduced to him by a well-known Indian film star, Abhi Bhattacharya. Before the spirit came to possess him, Dadaji was Amiya Roy Chaudhury, a family man with a family business in Calcutta. I met him a few months ago in Bombay and wrote of the meeting in my diary:

Dadaji is a tall, light-skinned man who wears his black hair long. His youthful handsomeness belies his seventy years. His eyes have a hypnotic spell-binding power. An aroma known in esoteric circles as the *padmagandha* (fragrance of the lotus) fills the room.

Dadaji seats himself on the divan and beckons on to me. I shuffle up and sit beside his legs. He tries to fix me in a kindly but hypnotic stare. He wants to know why I have to come to see him. I tell him of my lack of faith, my disbelief in the existence of a divine power and my curiosity about him and his following.

"What if Sri Satya Narain (True God) wants to communicate with you?" he asks. I look puzzled. "What if he sends you a memento?" He asks again. He raises his right hand in the air, and on his palm lying open and empty before me appears a medalion with an image of an elderly man. "It is Sri Satya Narain's gift to you," assures Dadaji. "No, it is not," I protest. "You, Dadaji,

have given it to me." He smiles. "I am no one; it is all the doing of Sri Satya Narain!"

"What is your name?" he asks. I tell him. He takes back the medallion, rubs the reverse side with his thumb. What had been a blank surface is now embossed with my name. Only my name is not correctly spelt. A minute later and as mysteriously as before a gold chain appears in the palm of his hand. "This is to wear the medallion round your neck," he says giving it to me. He runs his fingers through my beard and my entire frame exudes the fragrance of the lotus flower.

The number of saintly men and women are beyond enumeration. Every district has its quota of living saints to whom people turn for advice on spiritual and worldly matters. Men will ask them about business affairs, barren women for blessings of motherhood, young men for help in their examinations, sick people for charms against sickness. And everyone will come for their *darshan*. Of the living saints the most famous is Anandamayee Ma. Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, has visited her on many occasions.

The seventy-six-year-old Anandamayee Ma (Mother of Bliss) is a phenomenon. Although she has a number of *ashrams* (some with schools attached to them) in different parts of India where her devotees live and meditate, the only solace most of them get from her is her *darshan*. She has no message for the world.

Anandamayee was born in village Kheora, now in Bangladesh, in 1896. Her real name was Nirmala Devi. Her parents were Brahmins and when Nirmala was thirteen she was given in marriage to a Brahmin boy, Ramani Mohan Charkavarty. It would appear that the marriage was never consummated. Nirmala Devi was a wayward child subject to prolonged periods of depression when she became dumb. (One period lasted three years.) She wandered about the countryside alone. She had seizures when like epileptics she foamed from the mouth. But she was a beautiful child who grew into a beautiful woman. It was at Dacca that a clerk working in a government office discovered that Nirmala Devi was in fact a reincarnation of the goddess Kali, consort of Shiva. This clerk was of the same age as Nirmala Devi. In his biography, *Mother As Revealed To Me* he describes how from the seventeenth year, various supernatural phenomena began to be

manifest in her. Her body would go into convulsions, adopting yogic postures, and she would chant the names of gods and goddesses.

The clerk was a *Matribhakta* (worshipper of God in the form of a mother). He proclaimed her to be the universal mother and gave her the name of Anandamayee Ma. *Bhaiji* (brother) as her clerk-devotee came to be known, served Anandamayee for twelve years till he died of consumption at the age of forty. Arthur Koestler in his *Lotus and the Robot* has described *Bhaiji* uncharitably as something of a tragic clown.

"Who are you?", "What are you?" *Bhaiji* is said to have asked Anandamayee Ma soon after he had attached himself to her. "What a childish question to ask!" retorted Anandamayee Ma. "What I was before, I am now, and shall be hereafter. I am whatever you or anybody may think I am. The yearnings (of the seekers of truth) have brought this body. You have all wanted it and so you have found it. That is all you need to know. So play with this doll for some time. Further questions will be fruitless."

"These words of yours, Mother, do not satisfy my yearning," insisted *Bhaiji*. Hearing this she spoke with slight vehemence, "Say, say, whatever you desire," and immediately a dazzling flood of heavenly light shone forth from Her face. *Bhaiji* records that he was "struck dumb with awe and wonder . . . All my doubts were laid at rest." However, he tried to test her by placing a live ember on her foot. It burnt, developed into a blister and suppurated. When medicines failed, *Bhaiji* sucked the pus out of her lotus feet with his own mouth.

Anandamayee Ma still refers to herself as "the doll" or "the body". She allows her devotees to bathe and dress her. She does not eat with her own hands; her female devotees take turns to place food in her mouth.

Anandamayee Ma's following also runs into hundreds of thousands. The majority of them are women. Amongst them there is the usual sprinkling of foreigners.

The Mother is a lady of few words. She smiles silently most of the time; sometimes giggles like a little girl, plays with her toes and abruptly orders suplicants to go away. Nevertheless the crowds flock to her, sit in rapt silence with their eyes shut imbibing the aura of sanctity that pervades the place. One of the women closest to her is the daughter of a wealthy Sikh landowner. She

left her husband a few days after her marriage without consummating it and has served Anandamayee Ma faithfully for the last thirty years. "What have you got out of all this?" I asked her. She answered my question in one word, "Everything".

* * *

There are many notable omissions in this anthology of Gurus and Godmen. This is more for paucity of space rather than any disrespect.

My own interest in the phenomenon of Godmen was roused by my meeting with Dadaji. Although I am a confirmed agnostic, the experience was traumatic. I have had similar experiences with others like Neelakantha Thataji and Baba Bhootnath who not only read my mind but told me details of my family. And when I took my leave produced *prasadam* of cardamoms out of his palm and continued pouring them out to the dozens of others who were there with me. In the home of the film star Leena Chandavarkar I saw oil lamps whirl like dancing dervishes as soon as her mother began to chant evening prayers.

Although baffled by these manifestations, I do not consider them real evidence of spiritual powers. I have little doubt that none of them could stand the test of scientific scrutiny. However, what impressed me more than what these Gurus, Godmen and God-women did or had to say was the adoration they inspired in their following and what it did to many of them. I have seen people on the verge of nervous breakdown restored to mental health; epileptics cured of epilepsy; drug addicts rid of drug addiction; diabetics able to produce their own insulin; even serious physical injury which had stubbornly refused to yield to medical treatment respond to the healing touch of the Guru. When it comes to the relationships of the Guru and his disciples, the age of miracles can by no means be considered to have passed.

The unflagging and unqualified faith that disciples repose in their Gurus has to be seen to be believed. When recently Dadaji was arrested on charges of forging a will, his devotee the film star Abhi Bhattacharya explained to me that this was the doing of Dadaji himself, his own *leela*, to test the faith of his followers. None of them were found wanting. It was the same with Sri Sathya

Sai Baba. A civil suit filed against him for recovery of a large sum of money was widely publicised in the press. But it did not make the slightest dent in his enormous following. Nor has the popularity of the young Guru Maharaj Ji diminished because of charges of smuggling foreign currency, living in a grand style and marrying his American secretary a few years older than himself, levelled against him. To the disciple, the Guru is God and therefore perfect.

Since I do not believe in God, I can hardly be expected to believe in his human manifestation. I thought it best to let devotees speak on the objects of their devotions and restricted my editorial blue pencil to correcting only blatant errors of grammar. The narrative is often repetitive, full of superlatives and exaggerated claims regarding the following. But it does convey something of the fervency that Gurus and Godmen inspire in their following. The only person who does not fall into the category of Gurus and Godmen is Mother Teresa. I have included her because she is a wonderful person as worthy of worship as any human being I have ever known.

Khushwant Singh
Editor

The Illustrated Weekly of India