

The Dangers of Dissent – Sanal Edamaruku

By ANSHUMANTH - An article from MIT Post - 7 February 2017



Sanal Edamaruku leading a Rationalist March in Warsaw, Poland, along with Maryam Namazie, Nina Sankari

In 1970, a young nationally acclaimed athlete died of blood cancer, when her deeply religious family refused to seek medical aid, believing instead in the power of prayer. A fifteen-year-old boy, named Sanal Edamaruku, who lived in that neighborhood was deeply shaken by this death. To him, this was an example of how dangerous blind beliefs could be and was perhaps what set the boy off on the path of rationalism. Edamaruku went on to become one of the country's most prominent rationalists. With his relentless tirade against superstition and belief in the supernatural, he became a magnet for trouble. This finally resulted in blasphemy charges against him, and his consequent exile to Finland.

Rationalism is defined by Rationalist International, the organization founded by Edamaruku in 1995, as a "world view based on scientific attitude and a humane value system free from any religion, dogma and arbitrary assumption of authority". Simply put, it means prioritizing knowledge and reasoning above unsubstantiated beliefs. Sanal Edamaruku worked towards its promotion in the 1990s with several village campaigns. During these, a technique called Rationalist Reality Theatre was developed. Several of the illusions that god-men used, to make themselves look like wielders of supernatural powers were replicated in front of audiences. After this, the trick behind the illusions was explained, exposing them for the mere theatrics that they were. This would, the hope was, encourage people to treat such claims with skepticism in the future.



Sanal Edamaruku - A hidden tablet can seemingly create holy ash from thin air

Edamaruku's popularity soared in 2008 due to a live program on India TV. Pandit Surinder Sharma, a guest on the show, claimed that he could use magic to kill anybody in under three minutes. Sanal Edamaruku – who was also present there – immediately challenged the pandit to prove what he'd said and offered himself up as the test subject. With no way out, Surinder Sharma accepted and began chanting his mantras. Three minutes later, Edamaruku was still alive. With viewership going through the roof, the channel extended the show, offering Sharma more time to achieve the kill. Edamaruku was left chuckling in amusement at the pandit's desperation. With the tantras failing him, the priest resorted to physical contact eliciting protests as he pressed down on Edamaruku's eyes and temples hoping to achieve with force what his prayers couldn't.

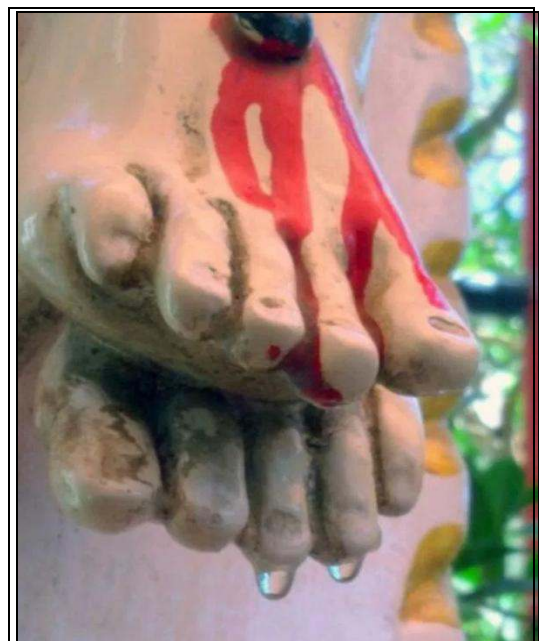


At the end of two hours, Edamaruku showed no signs of any discomfort. When the anchor of the show declared him a failure, the pandit asked for another round. In this “Great Tantra Challenge”, he planned to perform the “ultimate destruction ceremony” under the open night sky. The pandit brought in several sidekicks to help. They carried out elaborate rituals, none of them yielding any more success than his previous efforts. It might seem absurd that people actually expected the rationalist to drop dead, but the fact is that several people in India still live in fear of men like Surinder Sharma.

The biggest controversy involving Edamaruku occurred in 2012. A statue of Jesus Christ in Mumbai was found to have a mysterious steady drip of water from its toe. It was soon hailed as a miracle, with hundreds of devotees flocking to the statue to witness it. Several lapped up the “holy water” in their religious fervor, even producing bottles to fill it with.

Unable to resist the opportunity to bust this miracle, Sanal Edamaruku went to Mumbai. As is the case for all such instances, there was a rational explanation for it. Upon investigation, he found the source of the water to be an overflowing drain nearby. The water was making its way up a wall through capillary action and then flowing off the statue.

Several reports of the incidents say that the blasphemy charges that were filed against him were in response to this revelation on TV. The truth, however, is slightly more complicated. As Sanal Edamaruku explained the findings on TV, he accused the church of being anti-science and manufacturing miracles like these to make money. In the live debate that followed on TV9, Bishop Agnelo Gracias, several church officials, and leaders of Christian groups maintained that the church had never claimed that the dripping water was a miracle and that Edamaruku's accusations were baseless. They demanded an apology and a withdrawal of his statements, threatening legal action against him. Edamaruku welcomed the prospect, declaring that he would love to debate the issue in court.



Water dripping off the statue Picture: BBC

When charges under section 259a of the Indian Penal Code, that deals with “deliberate and malicious acts, intended to outrage religious feelings” were made in police stations, he filed for and was denied anticipatory bail. In a later interview, he said that he wasn’t worried about the outcome of the trial itself. However, in blasphemy cases, the police could arrest him without any investigation and jail him until his trial, which would take years. This risk he did not want to take, and so he left for his European lecture tour earlier than scheduled. Facing the prospect of arrest upon return to India, Edamaruku was forced into exile in Finland where he still lives.

“Sanal should realize that his right to expression should not encroach on my right to freedom of faith, of belief, of religion,” said Joseph Dias, then General Secretary of the Catholic Secular Forum. One of the fundamental duties listed in the constitution is “to develop the scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform”. Edamaruku argues that this is exactly what the Indian Rationalist Association aims to encourage and that is exactly what he has done in Mumbai. Human Rights lawyer Colin Gonsalves further points out that the act requires a deliberate and malicious act, which has not been committed here. In 1957, the Supreme Court too had noted that the law does not penalize every insult to religion.

The Catholic Church of Mumbai, in its press release, has said that the FIRs were filed by groups of individuals offended by his statements and it was not their doing. Cardinal Oswald Gracias of Mumbai offered a compromise, directing the Catholic groups to drop the FIR and Sanal Edamaruku to apologize for his statement. Edamaruku however maintains that he has no reason to apologize since he has not done anything wrong, and the cases remain filed.

Regardless of whether Sanal Edamaruku crossed a few lines, the issue here is a far greater one. Section 295a seeks to put a restriction on our fundamental right to free speech. It is hardly worth having the right to free speech if the right does not extend to things that others disagree with. Regressive blasphemy laws like ours have been used throughout history to hound free-thinkers and intellectuals. Incidents like these serve as reminders that there are still quite a few obstacles, even within our own legal framework, that stop us from achieving an ideal democracy. These obstacles require bold men like Sanal Edamaruku to step up and question the things that most wouldn’t dare to.

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- Die Nacht als mich ein Guru im TV zu töten versuchte - www.atheisten-info.at/downloads/Edamaruku.pdf
- Jesus-Wasser-Wunder enttarnt - <http://www.atheisten-info.at/infos/info0831.html>
- Indien: Vernunft unter Beschuss - <http://www.atheisten-info.at/infos/info0846.html>
- Edamaruku: der Kampf geht weiter - <http://www.atheisten-info.at/infos/info0867.html>
- Polizei sucht Sanal Edamaruku - <http://www.atheisten-info.at/infos/info0948.htm>
- Meinungsfreiheit für Sanal Edamaruku! - <http://www.atheisten-info.at/infos/info0956.htm>
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- Der Wunderheiler von Janakpuri - www.atheisten-info.at/downloads/Der_Wunderheiler_von_Janakpuri.pdf
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