

Interview:

Sanal Edamaruku - "Reason for optimism"

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Interview with Sanal Edamaruku, president of the IRA. By SAGNIK DUTTA

SANAL EDAMARUKU, the president of the Indian Rationalist Association, has been at the forefront of the fight against superstition and black magic. The Catholic Church pressed blasphemy charges against him for exposing the miracle of a water-dripping crucifix¹. He lives in Finland in self-imposed exile at present. In an email interview to Frontline, Edamaruku spoke about the challenges to the rationalist movement and the future of a post-religious society in India.



What do you think is the future of the rationalist movement in India in the wake of the Dabholkar murder and other increasing incidents of threats to rationalists from practitioners of blind faith?

Violence is always frightening. I am writing/ talking to you from Helsinki, where I have been living for more than one year now in self - imposed exile after the Catholic Church in India pressed blasphemy charges against me for exposing the “miracle” of a water - dripping crucifix in Mumbai as a plumber’s problem.

But despite attacks and threats, I see good reason for optimism. Looking back on the last four decades that I spent with rationalist education campaigns and on miracle exposures, I see a dramatic change in climate in favour of reason and science that has accelerated in recent years.

Two years back, I revisited the minutes and documents of the investigation that I and my team had conducted in May 2001, when Delhi was gripped by the monkey man phobia [In 2001, a phantom - like creature, about four feet tall, which apparently attacked people at night was reportedly seen on the outskirts of Delhi on many occasions]. For more than a month, the phantom monster was the centre of all public attention; in the villages and

on the outskirts of Delhi, nobody would sleep at night; some people jumped from their roofs to escape the creature; and the government had 3,000 policemen out in arms to catch the beast.

Initially, our voice of reason explaining the mass hysteria did not gain currency. It took us several days to bring the mania down. Ten years after, I went once again to all the haunted places and met many of the people we had questioned about the alleged encounters with the phantom. Most of them were convinced that the horror and vision had been nothing but a product of their overheated imagination, and were rather embarrassed when we confronted them with their old claims. In a survey done among the monkey man’s victims, our rationalist education campaigns were rated both very effective and beneficial for Indian society. Sixty - three per cent of the sample wished to see rationalist education as a subject in Indian school curricula.

It may still take more time and rationalist effort. But we see Indian society slowly shedding its medieval baggage and set to overcome superstition, fundamentalism and intolerance. It is not just Asaram Bapu who feels the heat these days. The public tide is turning against the whole massive power complex based on exploiting the gullible.

How do you read this rise in blind faith at a time when India is rising as an economic power?

Rationalism has gained enormous ground in recent times. But a well - known phenomenon that affects all transforming societies is very much present in India these days, as we are going through a fast - growth track. Dramatic changes in social realities upset many people. They may feel afraid that their beliefs and old value systems are undergoing big change. So, the sense of insecurity may urge some of them to feel good by imagining that they have a safety belt. The New Age faith alternatives offered by a new brand of gurus against their traditional crumbling old faith and tradition are giving them temporary relief. As a result, a very different category of defenders of superstition emerge - the educated, upward-moving, urban middle class. Their lives are transforming at a fast pace, confronting them with new chances, challenges and choices. Sometimes even otherwise, modern and sensible people suddenly feel the need to fasten the imaginary seat belts and reintegrate old rituals with new definitions into their life. Godmen are catering a lot to this situation.

¹ Siehe <http://www.atheisten-info.at/infos/info1257.html> - dort sind auch Links zu den einzelnen Teilen dieser Geschichte

Why do people resort to belief in superstitions?

The transition of society is at different stages in different parts of the country. In villages where the nearest primary health centre is 20 kilometres away, the local magic healer will have great influence. Also in places where literacy levels are too low, the gullibility level will be high while the receptiveness to scientific temper will be very low. But illiteracy and lack of medical facilities are not the only criteria. In cities and among highly educated people also we sometimes see great dependence on superstition and blind beliefs. Lack of public understanding of science is seen in both developed societies and backward ones.

During our village campaigns we sometimes encountered uneducated, partially literate people, who never had a chance to acquire primary scientific knowledge or training in logical thinking. They love miracles of all kinds, because they draw comfort from the thought that their sometimes unpleasant real life situations could miraculously change some day. Therefore, they have a tendency to cling to superstitious beliefs and to protect themselves from the insight that they are baseless. They can come out of the superstition only when their firewall breaks for a moment. Therefore, we have developed special techniques to catch them by surprise and open their minds.

Then there is another category of defenders of superstition. They are educated and well settled, some are sophisticated and suave. You find them in all classes and positions in the hierarchies up to the top. Some are celebrities, politicians and even scientists. The root of their commitment to the supernatural is obviously not naivety and lack of knowledge. They insist on miracles against their better judgment. And normally, they do it in an arrogant tone. Between these two extremes - the uneducated villager and the arrogant celebrity, the exploited victim and the "brand ambassador" - you find all shades and intermediate forms. Our work is aimed at liberating the victims, appealing to the conscience of the borderline cases, and exposing the bigwigs.

Is your fight primarily against superstitious practices or is there a thrust against religion in general?

I see a difference between religion as a kind of rather abstract philosophical position and a multi-faceted machinery that is controlling and regulating people's lives in all aspects, causing fear and submission and interfering with personal decisions and life plans. I would like to discourage the second, and empower people to free themselves from its strings. But the decision is up to the individual. The fault line beyond which I demand belief to become a matter of strict legal interference is not simply running between established traditions and institutions and "wild" superstition. For some decades, we have observed that established religious institutions all over the world are on a downward slide. They seem to be on the way to extinction or they may survive only in some dark corners or theocratic resorts. The Catholic Church, for example, is still running a multinational network of institutions and influencing international political decisions. But in the Western world, it does not play an important role in people's lives anymore. That is why India is the Vatican's last hope to escape a great financial crunch.

What role do you think the television and the Internet have played in popularising black magic and superstitious practices? How can they be used more successfully in countering superstitions?

The huge Indian TV network, reaching out to people in all nooks and corners of the country, is enormously influential. Even if it is presenting pure entertainment, it is constantly opening up new horizons for people trapped in a narrow world. Getting an opportunity to compare cultures and consider what they had never dared to dream of, they grow out of the dungeons of tradition and the limitations of their lives. When some Indian channels decided to focus on controversies of rationalist and scientific positions versus superstitious miracles, we got for the first time an opportunity to communicate directly and frequently to millions of people all over the country. Rationalist impact has multiplied. Even many programmes that were biased against us turned out sometimes to become our success.

To counter us, the enemies of reason became enormously eloquent and brought up the big guns. Some channels presented the champions of the supernatural round the clock and bombarded the viewers with massive high-tech promotion of miracles. This created the wrong impression that superstition is in the forefront. But their desperate vigour was rather the beginning of their last stand. Rationalist educators, supported by outspoken scientists, used their chances effectively and studied to deflate great balloons with a few convincing pinpricks. And the majority of people, on the other hand, became very receptive to the voice of reason.

I have personally attended more than a thousand TV programmes in recent years and explained innumerable miracles and confronted miracle agents of all colours and shades - astrologers, godmen, tantrics, priests of all major religions, past - life regression therapists, faith healers and a host of bizarre psychopaths. Some of my programmes had enormous influence on public perception of supernatural claims. My encounter with Pandit Surender Sharma in 2008 made history. When I survived with a smile all attempts of the then well-known TV tantric to kill me with mantra and tantra during a live programme, a huge amount of fear was lifted from people's minds. To this day, people from all walks of life contact me to tell me that this TV programme was a turning point in their lives. I had not planned this event, it came as a wonderful chance, and I feel deep satisfaction that I was able to use it.

TV channels have contributed considerably to the popularisation and impact of rationalism - sometimes squarely against their intention and the intention of their owners. Now imagine what could be achieved, if India, in the truly secular spirit of its Constitution, would have the political will to put legal limits to the business with fear and irrationality.

Any plans of returning to India and ending your exile?

I wish to return to India as soon as possible without risking my life and liberty. I have to continue my rationalist work. But I don't intend to become a martyr. My "crime" - exposing a Catholic miracle - was done by way of discharging my constitutional duty. Yet, my petitions to the Indian government and the Maharashtra government, requesting their intervention to get the ridiculous blasphemy cases against me quashed, have not even been answered. A British petition with nearly 13,000 signatories, among them rationalist celebrities like Richard Dawkins and James Randi, had the same fate.
