

The Pleasures of Gurudom

- N D Dani

Abstract: I am reproducing below the unabridged contents of my letter which I emailed to my young friend from Connecticut, Shultz Goldman, whom I met and befriended during my last trip to his country. Shultz had written to me that he was curious to know about India and its gurus and godmen. I could not say no to this young and very curious American friend and wrote the following letter. Excuse me if you find the epistolary form a little irritating and the references to our epics and other mythological literature superfluous. These references were meant for the consumption of Shultz. I shall request you to please put up with this superfluity.

My dear Shultz,

I am flattered by the faith you have put in me by asking about the gurus and god men of my great country. (Great it is despite its gurus and god men.)

India is a land of gurus and god men. Some British writers described it as a land of snakes and snake charmers. Gurus and godmen are also snake charmers. Though with a difference. The snakes they charm into obedience are Indians whom the gurus/godmen make fangless, metaphorically, that is. It all starts like this. Somebody, not able to handle an emotionally crippling experience in life or some physical problem that has acquired threatening proportions and is not responding well to medication, stumbles upon a certain guru or godman. S/he is persuaded to believe – the poor soul has no option but to be persuaded – that the 'solution' lies with that guru. Such a person is comparable to someone drowning in the sea and lo! s/ he happens to see a raft and won't s/ he give her/ his all to catch that raft? Such a person is extremely vulnerable emotionally and intellectually. It is this kind of person that the guru is waiting for. Once such persons have been disabled by the upsetting experience in life which they cannot handle on their own, they gladly join the followers of a guru / godman and quickly lose their power to think. They are like tamed and caged animals that jump and run through rings and pick balls at the behest of the ring master. They have money, time and energy to spare which the gurus / godmen use to further their disciples' 'spiritual' ends. (It is another matter that the gurus and godmen have their own 'unspiritual ends' on their agenda which they further with their disciples' money, time and energy.) Yes dear, all that glitters is not gold.

Also, now women have entered the fold to undo the gender imbalance but the representation of women as gurus and godwomen is woefully inadequate and many more aspiring types can and should get into this

business. I would go to the extent of suggesting – what an unholy thought! – that our government introduces some order into this field by deciding upon some qualifications for this job and advertises the vacancies. A panel of selectors, consisting of old timers in the field known for their manipulative skills, should interview the candidates for the job of the godman/ godwoman. Our government may even consider honouring the most successful – that is, the most manipulative guru / godman or woman later on by instituting an award called: “The Most Manipulative Guru / Godman (read Godwoman, too) of the Decade.”

In this letter from India I propose to uncover some of the tactics employed by these gurus / godmen to ply their trade. First things first. Dress is of utmost importance. God men don't wear stitched clothes. Perhaps they are harking back to the times when the loom had indeed been invented – otherwise how could you have cloth at all – but stitching was not known to man. Modernity and being contemporary may be a virtue in other fields, not in the world of gurudom. Here 'ancientness' confers a 'status' upon the guru. Hairstyle is of utmost importance. Keep your hair long. Don't ever go to a barber. Don't shave. Let your beard grow. Try to resemble the two-legged hairy ancestors of *homo sapiens*. Once I asked a lady who happens to be a keen follower of a spiritual guru why the swamis and gurus keep their hair long. Her answer had the simplicity of a child: “You see rishis in ancient times kept their hair long. That's why swami ji keeps his hair long.” Next comes your ability to mouth Sanskrit. In India anyone who wants to look wise should be able to fluently mouth Sanskrit; to look smart one has to master the ability to mouth English. If a guru can mouth both, he is the ultimate guru. Many gurus in India have achieved this. Further, you can't be a guru without a large fan following. The same goes for the Ashram. Ashrams can not be created without money. Apart from unidentifiable sources of funding, the gurus must know the art of making his fans part with their hard earned money to build ashrams and keep him in comfort. How do you create a fan following? In India you have, broadly speaking, two types of followers. One: people who do not have the benefit of having attended school/ college and are illiterate. They can not think for themselves. Two: people who went to a college / university and have degrees and are still illiterate because they can not think for themselves. Both the constituencies are available to a prospective guru to create a fan following. The formally illiterate followers can be kept in the fold by digging into the Puranas (ancient tales of gods and goddesses held in high respect by Indians and their superhuman feats.) and the two epics, namely, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Those who aspire to lead the pack of formally educated but virtually illiterate have to be cautious. They have to have a smattering of modern scientific discourse. Their 'spiritual discourses' do delve into the Puranas and the two epics but there is a clever garnishing of the dish with scientific terms like 'quantum theory', 'particle physics', 'genetics', 'DNA', terms from western psychology like 'id', the 'unconscious' and the 'conscious' and so on. The

'educated illiterate' is impressed with these lacies and can swallow the bait without resistance. Many gurus offer their followers a clever mix of yogic exercises, meditation, auto-suggestion and 'spiritual discourse'. Honestly speaking, yogic exercises are a wonderful set of exercises designed in ancient India to keep one absolutely fit. They keep one not only physically ship-shape but teach them how to discipline their mind. The same goes for meditation and auto-suggestion. Both techniques are time-tested to learn mental control. Here the guru offers something vitally useful to the follower. The improvement in the physical health and learning how to control his/ her mind creates faith in the guru. The guru/godman offers a mixed package. This package consists of counselling, yogic exercises and ideas which are cleverly manipulated to indoctrinate and control the mind of the pupil. But that is not the end of the story. Once you master the yogic and mental-control techniques, you will stop attending and organizing gatherings. Well known gurus create spiritual teachers all over the country who organize gatherings of local followers. Training Courses ranging from Preliminary ones to Advanced ones are periodically offered to the new and the old entrants. Obviously, all this comes at a price. 'Spirituality' has a price tag attached to it. The guru owes his existence to a constant supply of disciples. How is this secured? It is enjoined upon the disciples to persuade more and more new entrants to join the 'spiritual' fold. This persuasion is given highfalutin names. Some gurus call it 'Seva or Service'. In practice it is nothing short of catching you by the scruff of your shirt collar and pushing you into the fold. At a gathering of the followers of one such organization I was asked by a young man to join the organization. Not wanting to be blunt in my refusal, I pleaded lack of time. He had been brain-washed to counter this argument. He said that he was a businessman but found time to attend the daily evening-gatherings so why couldn't I. By now I was at my social tether's end and wanted to give him some blunt answer. But social politeness makes cowards of us all. Plus, I was at a function at a friend's house and I didn't want to create a scene. I expressed my regret to the young man by saying that I was sorry to have disappointed him. Do you know what he said in response? He said, "Well, it is one's karma." This threw the lid off my politeness. Keeping my cool I only said to him, "Young man, so you think that all those people who haven't joined your spiritual organization were devils in their previous births and did terrible deeds. That's why they refuse to be persuaded!" The young man was not taught how to respond to such a line of argument.

A good trick to catch new fish and trap her/ him in the meshes of a spiritual organization is to frequently say something like this to a new person, "Mr so and so in our organization has a degree from IIM. Mr so and so who sings bhajans at our evening gatherings has a degree from MIT." This is done to persuade Doubting Thomases to drop their doubts. Television has spread the reach of these gurus by airing their 'spiritual discourses' live or by airing recorded sessions to a large audience. There are now television channels which are exclusively

devoted to 'spirituality'. These spiritual gurus have daily or weekly meetings with their disciples where they answer 'questions'. These sessions are telecast. A careful observation of their answers will expose their *modus operandi*. Philosophically difficult questions are cleverly turned on their heads or simply laughed away. Most questions have cut and dried answers presented in a new way. Unscientific 'facts' are offered as archival facts. Most backward, exploitative thinking is revealed to anyone who has intelligence and willingness to examine this spiritual subterfuge. But to question the guru is unholy and so the followers suppress their critical faculty as being ungodly and un-disciple like. At one such Q/A session a devotee asked the guru as to why it was necessary to have a guru. Now, this is like asking a shopkeeper to close shop and die of starvation. The guru didn't bat an eyelid. The 'absolute necessity' of the 'guru' was asserted with the help of an analogy. With absolute cool he asked the devotee if he would ask the same question of a doctor if he were ill. "If you are ill you have to have a doctor. The same goes for a spiritual guru." The answer was greeted with loud clapping by the gathering of devotees.

Dance and music have always had an emotional appeal. The purpose of the guru/ godman is best served by suppressing the thinking faculty of the disciples and nothing can do this better than encouraging them to dance and sing. If you confront a guru/ godman about the relevance of dance in a programme meant for the spiritual uplift of the disciples, pat comes the reply: "But this dance is only a reflection of the cosmic dance." The guru/ godman proceeds to inform the 'spiritually ignorant' questioner: "You see the entire creation is dancing. The planets are dancing. The cosmic dance is a way of the created universe to experience the joy of participating in the joy of the Creator." You have a feeling that somebody has flattened you with a truckload of verbiage. The verbiage of the guru/ godman is a clever way of justifying the dance at the daily gatherings by the bhaktas. The same goes for music. Readymade filmi tunes are used to set bhajans to music. Sometimes the guru/ godman asks the bhaktas at the gathering to sing some amorous song from a Hindi film in which the hero is singing about the pain of separation from the heroine. Or it could be some other emotion. The bhaktas are told to imagine that they are devotees of God and the song is an expression of their emotions for God. The 'erotic' is cleverly raised to the level of the 'spiritual'. In this way, thanks to the guru/ godman, Hindi films are engaged to contribute to the 'spiritual uplift' of the bhaktas. Dance and song create a general feeling of wellbeing and keep worries off the minds of the disciples, at least for the duration of the satsang. Also, dance and music serve as 'padding' to lengthen out the 'spiritual discourse'.

Nothing impresses the spiritually-minded Indian audience about the greatness of India as much as West-bashing. Lay blame for all the ills in the Indian society at the West's door. You can be hundred percent sure of loud clapping. Sometimes plain lies are told to impress the 'greatness' of India, the country of the followers. At one such gathering – it was a

telecast of a recorded 'spiritual discourse - a guru told the followers that the names of the months in the Edwardian calendar are actually of Sanskrit origin and were given by Indians. The spiritually-hungry audience was told that the words like January, June, August and so on have no meaning in English. The guru was clever enough to know that his spiritual audience did not have the intellectual wherewithal to suspect that these names may have originally belonged to some other European language. (I am aware that you know that these names come from Latin.) The gurus suffer from age old caste bias - no, their spirituality couldn't rid them of it - which peeps through chinks although they preach social brotherhood to their followers. I shall give you an actual illustration from a Q / A session. There is an episode in the Mahabharata in which the famed guru Drona demanded the right thumb from a low-caste disciple named Eklavya as his *gurudakshina* - his fee - because he had mastered archery by practicing the art in front of his (Guru's) clay statue. (Let me tell you that this boy was refused admission to guru Drona's academy because of his low caste.) Drona was playing politics. He trained the children of the well-to-do Kshatriyas - a high caste in India - who paid him well. (Drona was official trainer to Kauravas and Pandavas, the warring rulers in ancient India whose wars and conflicts are described in the epic Mahabharata.) Both his high caste and his sound economic sense went against admitting a low-caste boy to his academy. I was aghast when in response to a question about the correctness of the conduct of guru Drona, the spiritual guru proclaimed, "Guru Drona did right. You see, it is because of the conduct of Drona that this little known boy has acquired fame. But for Drona's conduct, the world would have never come to know about the existence of Eklavya." So much for social brotherhood. Just imagine, my dear friend, how many simple things of daily existence you can not do - you cannot even lift your tea cup with your right hand - if you lose your right thumb and here a teacher deprived his devoted disciple of his right thumb because his excellence in archery didn't suit his selfish interests. (Actually, Drona didn't want Eklavya to surpass his favourite disciple Arjuna in archery. Eklavya could be made ineffective by asking him to cut off his right thumb. One cannot shoot an arrow with the help of a bow without his right thumb. The modern day guru endorsed this 'cruelty' because he has not been able to grow out of his caste bias despite being a self-proclaimed 'spiritual' and 'liberated' soul. Down with this 'spirituality' and may such 'liberatedness' be hanged! May the Lord save us from such pseudo gurus! An ordinary human being - not having the self-styled 'spirituality' of these gurus/godmen - has greater humanity and compassion.

Can spirituality be used to climb the social ladder? You don't believe it? OK. Let me show you something. Many people who have money want to get noticed in society because mere money cannot secure this in this age and day in India because lots of people have lots of money today in India, thanks to our govt's opening up of the economy to privatization. Disinvestment policies by successive govts in India in the last twenty five

years have created a class of *nouveau riche* who want to be seen on Page 3. How to get access to Page 3? Join some spiritual organization. Next time whenever you have to introduce yourself you can take this line: "I am so and so from so and so spiritual organization." Since the 'spiritual organization' to which you belong happens to be a spiritual organization / movement which has a certain tag attached to it you get noticed. Your money and palatial house cannot secure this for you because money and palatial houses are not in minority in India these days. The gimmick is like this. Do some courses in a well known spiritual organization and then manipulate to get some official position in the organization. Alternatively, you can offer your large house for weekly or daily evening gatherings for the local chapter of the organization. This has two benefits. You get a reputation for philanthropy. Plus, you get noticed in society for being part of that spiritual organization. In fact the use of religion / pseudo-spirituality to further one's worldly ends is not a new thing in India but this is the newest method of doing this. There is another 'use' of this association with spiritual organizations. Remember, these organizations enjoy large fan following. Even local chapters located in cities have large followers. This large fan following consists of followers who have blind faith in any thing that is uttered by the local chiefs of the spiritual organization. The local chief derives his power from the spiritual head in the same way in which the Pope derives his power from God or Bishops derive their power from the Pope. The signal is sent by the guru/ godman from his 'abode' to the local chiefs who then cleverly manipulate the bhaktas/ fans to cast their votes in favour of the desired political party. If you are enrolled in a so-called spiritual organization in India, at election time you will be asked to cast your vote in favour of a particular candidate from a particular party. Remember, this candidate and this party suits the business / professional interests of the local chiefs as also the guru/ godman. You blindly cast your vote in favour of that candidate. Such is the power of indoctrination and 'faith' which has been assiduously 'created' among the bhaktas/ fans over years. The guru/ godman and the local chiefs of these spiritual organizations use their voting clout to get close to powerful politicians and seek favours from them which they will gladly give knowing fully well their power to influence a mass of people.

I should like to hope that my observations and analyses of the gurus and godmen of my beloved country have enlarged your understanding of the ways that they employ to carry on their 'lucrative' business of 'distributing' spirituality.

Unspiritually yours,

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