

# The harsh truth about India's godmen



SHASHI THAROOR

**AWAKENING INDIA**

**L**ATE last month, when two Indian states and the national capital were held to ransom by rioting mobs protesting their spiritual leader's conviction on two counts of raping minor girls, many Indians found themselves confronting several painful truths about their country.

The leader who spurred these protests is Gurmeet Singh, one of the more prominent of several "godmen," or self-proclaimed spiritual leaders, who flourish across India. The flamboyant, jewellery-bedecked Singh calls himself Baba Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Insaan—a compound of Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh names, followed by the word for "Human" in Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu. And he has a reputation for sexually exploiting his female followers.

In 2002, two of those followers mustered the courage to press charges. In the 15 years and 200 sittings of the court it took to get a conviction, Singh's devotees made numerous efforts to pressure investigators, police, judges, and the complainants to withdraw the case. But they did not surrender, and last

month, Singh was given a 20-year prison sentence.

Singh was always a peculiar godman, eschewing spiritual asceticism for gaudy showmanship and ostentatious living. He liked his hair long, his motorcycles powerful, his cars expensive, his attire sequined, and his women clingy. He performed in popular music videos of his own composition—his biggest hit is called "Love Charger"—and had a feature film made about himself called *MSG: The Messenger of God*.

It is estimated that this unlikely "Rockstar Baba" attracted tens of millions of fanatical worshippers to his *Dera Sacha Sauda* movement. And with the help of his henchmen, he kept the flock together in ruthlessly effective ways. Most notably, a crusading small-town journalist who reported the rape complaint against him was murdered in 2002.

Over the years, *Dera Sacha Sauda* amassed a significant land bank and real-estate assets, and enjoyed considerable influence in the states of Punjab and Haryana, with its reach extending to Delhi. It also fulfilled a fundamental need in Northern Indian society: to give millions an identity, a standing in society, and a sense of security that they and their families had not previously known.

*Dera* members are overwhelmingly Sikhs. A key message of Sikhism—equality among the faithful—has in the past inspired

people from the lower Hindu castes to convert. But so deep is the prejudice in Indian society that many converted Sikhs found that their new co-religionists of higher castes, who dominate the faith's official religious bodies, treated them no better than Hindus had.

Faced with an entrenched *status quo*, many Sikhs of less privileged backgrounds became disillusioned.

*The resistance by Dera followers to their guru's conviction exposed their fears that without him and his organisation, they might once again face social and economic marginalisation.*

Their feelings of anger and helplessness, compounded by poor education and soaring unemployment, often drove them toward alcohol and drugs.

For these desperate people, the *Dera Sacha Sauda* and its charismatic leader—not to mention the several other, mostly smaller *Deras* dotting Punjab and Haryana—emerged as saviours. The *Dera* offered free education to its members and their children and free food for the hungry. It kept the faithful off drugs, and

provided employment in its enterprises, offering not only a livelihood, but also a sense of meaning and purpose. It thus delivered to its followers that most precious and intangible of human needs: a sense of worth and belonging.

Politicians played along with the *Deras*, which helped to maintain social peace, tamp down discontent,

and channel frustrations toward constructive activity. The *Deras* helped reduce addiction, replaced anomie with community, and redirected despair to divinity. So, rather than repudiate them as dangerous cults, successive governments rushed to embrace them.

The loyalty the *Deras* inspire among their members should not be underestimated. There is, of course, the religious fervour that accompanies affiliation with a spiritual guru. But at the heart of a

*Dera's* appeal is social and economic security, the ability to fulfil people's basic needs. In Singh's case, where government and civil society failed, an apparent charlatan succeeded.

That success mattered far more than Singh's flaws. People who were willing to lend their wives and daughters to their guru, for the sake of the security he offered, could not understand why the same "blessing," extended to the two girls, should land him in jail. As a commenter put it on Facebook, "A lost man doesn't care if a rapist gives him direction. A hungry man will take food from a murderer's hand."

The resistance by *Dera* followers to their guru's conviction exposed their fears that without him and his organisation, they might once again face social and economic marginalisation. They identify intensely with him, whatever he does. They are willing to kill for him, because, as they might see it, they would really be killing for themselves.

That commitment was apparent in the rioting and destruction that followed Singh's conviction, in which 30 people were killed, dozens of vehicles burned, several buildings (including two new hotels) set ablaze, train carriages wrecked, and roads blocked, paralysing life across an important swath of northern India for several days.

Many Indians lament that such blind religious devotion should thrive

in their country in the second decade of the twenty-first century. But the violence raises far more troubling questions than that.

The episode shows that India's much-touted economic development has shallow roots, as it has failed to deliver caste equality and social justice to the under-classes. It shows that official institutions of governance will all too readily delegate their responsibilities, enabling those who run religious orders to live above the law. It shows the fragility of law enforcement, which failed so spectacularly in the face of mass fury. And it shows the hold of charismatic leaders over vast numbers of people who find validation and purpose in unthinking obedience.

Baba Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Insaan was flown to prison in a luxurious helicopter with an "adopted daughter" in devoted attendance; he nibbled abstractedly at a piece of chocolate as a police escort carried his bags. The Baba may be in jail—but Indian society is still in the dock.

Shashi Tharoor, a former UN under-secretary-general and former Indian Minister of State for External Affairs and Minister of State for Human Resource Development, is currently Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs and an MP for the Indian National Congress.

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(Exclusive to The Daily Star)

# The light of the stars A goodbye to Bangladesh

MARITHA ISABEL ALVARADO WATKINS

**H**ERE we are three years later, packing, getting ready to leave Bangladesh. When you are the spouse of a diplomat, this is your fate. To come and go.

My husband and I arrived in Dhaka in February 2015. I had taken early retirement to be with my husband on his last UN assignment. When I worked for the UN, I remember sending correspondence via diplomatic pouch to Dhaka, and Bangladesh seemed so far, far away. Not that I didn't know anything about it. When I was a student in England, in my late teens, I remember walking in the streets of London and seeing in the front page of a newspaper, the photo of a child with his hand cut off, a victim of the War of Independence. That picture haunted me for a long time. But Bangladesh still seemed so far away.

We were in Canada, when my husband told me that he was being considered for a position in Dhaka. "Oh, but it is 11 time zones away!" I exclaimed. But he was enthusiastic about coming back to Asia, where he had travelled as a young man. I quit my job, and here we were in Dhaka, renting an apartment, looking for furniture, buying curtains... We felt as if we were getting married and setting house for the first time.

My first impression of Dhaka, after landing, was seeing a rickshaw for the first time. It was something that I had seen only in documentaries, or in programmes of National Geographic. "A rickshaw!!" I exclaimed, feeling terribly excited.

As time went by, we became familiar with Bangladeshi life: how to protect ourselves from the inclement heat and humidity, the terrific traffic jams and the waves of mosquitoes (my husband considers himself Bangladeshi because he had a bout of dengue fever).

I was lucky that I was able to travel with him to Khulna, the Sundarbans, Jessore, Sylhet, to Chittagong, the Chittagong Hills, Cox's Bazar and to Teknaf to take the ferry to St Martin's Island.

I can say that during my short stay I was lucky that I was able to travel around and got to know the landscapes and people of Bangladesh. When we travelled to Sylhet, it was autumn and I fully understood the poem of Tagore:



PAINTING BY SHAHNOOR MAMUN

*In Autumn, Oh mother mine, in the full-blossomed paddy fields, I have seen spread all over - sweet smiles! Ah, what beauty, what shades, what an affection and what tenderness!*

And here is what I would like to say in this goodbye. It is said that you don't walk a path without being influenced for the rest of your life by what you encounter in that path. What I found in that path was the enormous resilience of Bangladeshis. They work and toil from sunup to sundown to gain the bread for themselves and their families. They are always busy. If you walk in Gulshan Road, you never see anyone just standing. Everybody is busying themselves from here to there. Bangladeshis do not expect anyone to take care of them. They can fend for themselves with courage and fearlessness and without self-pity.

One day I came to our apartment, and I found a young man repairing our air conditioner unit, sitting on top of it, without any safety equipment, with eight floors of open space below him. I was horrified and asked him to come inside immediately, and he did so, but not before he had finished his job.

I saw from the window of the hotel we stayed in when we arrived, a couple, husband and wife, probably in their late 50s. He was a bricklayer, and worked on the 7th floor, standing with sandals in a flimsy bamboo scaffolding, while his wife would bring bricks tied up with a piece of cloth to her back. I was so moved by this—by their courage and what seemed to be a true husband/wife partnership.

I loved to watch the terraces of the buildings around our apartment. At sundown, all the children go out to play in the roofs, and in some of the faraway terraces you could see some people walking back and forth, doing exercise.

Maybe they cannot afford to go to a gym, but being in the roof at sundown is better than a gym. My favourite memory of watching terraces in Dhaka was one morning when I saw a young girl dancing

in her terrace. Probably she thought no one was watching her, and she must have been happy and she made me happy, too.

It was wonderful to go out in the evening with my husband and see Gulshan transformed into a sort of fairyland with all the twinkling little lights adorning trees and buildings in anticipation of a wedding. Dhaka is a city that can be daunting during the day, but at night it transforms itself.

And then Bangladesh makes me think of the light of the stars. It takes many years for the light of the stars to reach earth, and what you see has passed a long time ago. Whenever I see a rickshaw, I think that I am watching something that will be seen only in museums many years from now. This colourful means of transportation, in the form that it is now in Bangladesh, will disappear very soon, replaced by the modern rickshaws I have already seen in the streets of Paris, Geneva and New York. What you see now in Bangladesh is a genuine culture that slowly will pass away. The world is like that, and advancement is inevitable.

So, I say goodbye, to all and each one of you that I have come into contact with in Bangladesh. It was nice to have met you. I will take from you your resilience and your goodwill.

Joy Bangla...

Martha Isabel Alvarado Watkins is the wife of the outgoing Resident Coordinator of the United Nations, Robert Watkins, and has worked with the United Nations in New York and Geneva with the UN Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

## A WORD A DAY

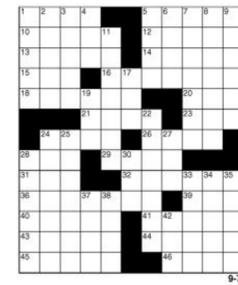


**GOATTAILS**  
noun

*The power of a popular candidate to gather support for other candidates in his or her party.*

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

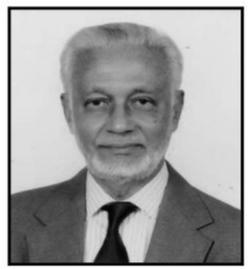
- ACROSS**
- 1 First person
  - 5 Is sullen
  - 10 Cruise ship
  - 12 History bit
  - 13 Use the tub
  - 14 Affect
  - 15 One, for Juan
  - 16 Brit's wrench
  - 18 Fashion
  - 20 Place of refuge
  - 21 Starting cards in Hold'em
  - 23 -- amis (my friends)
  - 24 Male moose
  - 26 Commentary piece
  - 28 Sprinted
  - 29 Store come-on
- DOWN**
- 1 Music buy
  - 2 Hunting goddess
  - 3 Writer Chekhov
  - 4 "Doesn't excite me"
  - 5 Really large
  - 29 Store come-on
  - 31 Hoppy brew
  - 32 Flag
  - 36 Event specialist
  - 39 Flamenco cry
  - 40 Cookout site
  - 41 They're adored
  - 43 Perfect places
  - 44 "Wake Up, Little --"
  - 45 "Walk Away --"
  - 46 Optimal
  - 7 "Snoo-kums," e.g.
  - 8 Came in
  - 9 Big-billed birds
  - 11 Flips
  - 17 Old hand
  - 19 Saints' org.
  - 22 Sailor's star
  - 24 Chaucer poem
  - 25 Left on the plate
  - 27 Signing need
  - 28 Drake, for one
  - 30 Penny prez
  - 33 Gallows sight
  - 34 New York's -- Island
  - 35 Stop-watch button
  - 37 Three squared
  - 38 Snowman's carrot
  - 42 Christen



**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

TENSES AGRA  
AVENUE CROW  
BEWARE TUBE  
POSSUM  
LAGS CABLE  
OUR DWELLON  
IRA RAN ICE  
RAMPART NAM  
ELBOW UGLY  
LINDEN  
AKIN AVIATE  
PINT NETTET  
EDGY KNEADS

## 5th Death Anniversary



We pray for Marhum Muslehuddin Ahmad on his 5<sup>th</sup> death anniversary today, the 10 September 2017. Marhum Muslehuddin Ahmad was a Founder Life Member of the North South University (NSU) Foundation, renamed as The North South Foundation for Education & Research, which established and administered NSU, now run by the North South University Trust. He was also the Founder Life Member of the Board of Governors of the Foundation and the then Parichalona Porshod of NSU.

He was a senior civil servant and diplomat and contributed a lot in promoting and advancing higher education in the private sector of the country. He breathed his last on 10 September 2012.

May Allah bless his departed soul and give the members of his family the strength to keep on bearing the loss.

