

AIM

This study was aimed at understanding why people feel the need to step outside the bounds of ‘mainstream traditional Hinduism’ and start following spiritual Guru(s) of differing and sometimes contrasting philosophies and tradition

This study also aimed at examining the question of agency by interrogating what factors people kept in mind when deciding which Guru they would choose to follow.

PREFACE

Before we start with the ethnographic detail of this study along with its sociological analysis, it would be beneficial for us to ascertain some terminology beforehand.

- From now on, the word ‘**informant**’ wherever used would mean follower of either of the two sects: Maharaj Surrender or Prem Rawat Maharaj depending on the context in which it is used.
- The word ‘**non-follower**’ would mean people, including us– the researchers, who do not follow the aforementioned sects. It is not to be confused with atheism with which it is traditionally associated.
- When we use the term ‘**Mainstream Hinduism**’ we do not use it to define any particular tradition (Hinduism is notorious for lacking any single dominant and unifying tradition). ‘Mainstream Hinduism’ is used in the sense of how those within the guru cults see the unaffiliated Hindu populace beyond the boundaries of their sect, they popularly refer to such people as people of a particular god for instance non-guru affiliated Hindus who worshipped the god Hanuman were called ‘Hanuman Walleh’ (People of Hanuman) . The aforementioned term is better seen as somewhat residual rather than descriptive.
- The word ‘**cult**’ used in this study is not to be understood as a pejorative term. The usage here mirrors the use of the term by Lawrence A Babb in his study of the ‘cult’ of Sathya Sai Baba. Cult simply means a devotion focused on the person of the Guru.
- Also the suffix-s is used wherever plural form of the Hindi word needs to be denoted, like Gurus for many Guru

Ethnographic Details and Analysis

Our investigation was conducted over a period of two weeks in two rather different fields of study. The first few days were spent in a village on the outskirts of Delhi (towards Dwarka) called **Jharoda Kalan** on 27th and 28th of June 2017. It has always been a part of Delhi, however it bears scarce resemblance to the bustling metropolis it neighbours. Jharoda more closely resembles the villages of eastern Haryana that stand across the state border a few kilometres away. Though not a numerical majority, Jharoda Kalan has always been a Jat dominated village. Though the village is surrounded by verdant fields, these are fast disappearing and being replaced by rows of concrete buildings. The decline of agriculture and the accompanying urbanisation has led to a situation where a rural way of life intersects with

urban sensibilities. This fast changing Jat dominated village was a stronghold of a Kabir Panthi sect centred on Surinder Maharaj. This guru's religious gatherings took us to the nearby city of **Jhajjar** in Haryana where he had his main Ashram. This Ashram was a simple mud and brick structure that was run and managed by the devotees. All the tasks needed to be done for the maintenance of this structure was done by the devotees themselves.

The second leg of fieldwork was carried out in the South Delhi suburb of Chhatarpur. In this quiet suburb lies the sprawling campus called the '**Raj Vidya Kender**'. It is the headquarters of a Kabir Panthi aligned sect that is led by the Guru Maharaj Prem Rawat. The campus houses several prayer halls, dormitories of various types for people of differing economic levels, a large dining hall to feed the faithful as well as a series of offices that managed the guru's massive bureaucracy of enlightenment.

The study was conducted over a period of two weeks and was based on multiple unstructured interviews with several informants from both the fields of study. We had 15 informants who provided us with multiple in-detail interviews whilst we also conducted 25 informal interviews. We also participated actively in multiple Satsangs (religious gatherings) that had been organised by both the godmen.

In the 15th century the mystic Kabir spread his monotheistic creed across North India that focused on the unity of god and man. His traditions were carried forward in a movement known as 'Kabir Panthi' (the way of Kabir). From the traditions of the Kabir Panthi emerged several other movements that owed their allegiance to the teachings of Kabir but had been modified considerably to match the genius of individual gurus. It was out of this churning that emerged both the sects that we have studied.

The cult around **Surinder Maharaj** was closely aligned to the traditions of Kabir Panthi in that the religious discourses from the guru focusses on the teachings of Kabir and so does most of the devotional music sung at the sects gatherings. The cult counted most of its membership from amongst the Jat population of eastern Haryana who were mostly from a rural or semi-urban background. The entire sect was organised in a simple and informal manner with certain prominent long time followers in each town being responsible for organising the devotees into local branches which would organise religious gatherings (Satsangs). Surinder Maharaj himself had attained the divine knowledge 'Gyaan' from his teacher Ishwarmani Maharaj, a Kabir Panthi aligned guru who had moved to post-independence Punjab from Orissa. On his death Ishwarmani Maharaj passed on the mantle to his foremost disciple Surinder. Much like Kabir his message centred on the supremacy of one god and the futility of ritualism in 'Mainstream Hinduism' (along with a deep emphasis on vegetarianism).

Prem Rawat Maharaj, the other godman whose cult we have studied, was from a Garhwali family of Gurus whose inspiration had always been Kabir. Once Guru Prem Rawat inherited the mantle from his father he modernised the sprawling farm house campus his family had received as a donation in the then quiet Delhi suburb of Chhatarpur, the aforementioned '**Raj Vidya Kender**'. The followers of this guru who have gone through the process of initiation call themselves 'Premis' or lovers as it represents their love for the one supreme truth i.e. the

formless Parmatama. Prem Rawat's organisation is very professionally run, with a cadre of permanent employees who are tasked with running the massive estate as well as managing the devotees who are required to do 'seva' or service to the sect every month.

Outline of Study

The findings of this study are more accessible once organised into a structure that explicates our main findings, hence the following outline is best used:

1. **Sath** or Ultimate Truth- A Concept
2. **Need** for a Guru in one's life
3. **Gyaan** or Knowledge of the Truth
4. Sath ka Sang: **Sathsang**
5. A hope for This **Worldly Benefits**
6. Secondary nature of traditional Hindu gods and traditions

Sath or Ultimate Truth- A Concept

Geographically, our journey began in the village— Jharoda Kalan located on the outskirts of Delhi near Haryana border. Intellectually and sociologically it began when we came across our first and by far the most prominent ethnographic concept— 'Truth' or 'Sath'. Our first informant, Mrs. Daya Kor a woman in her late sixties, on meeting us for the first time at her home greets us with "Sath Sahib". A greeting that we would encounter every time we meet and say goodbye to her or other fellow members of the sect she follows. This greeting is not only used when people of this sect meet among themselves but also when they meet with non-followers. This as we came to know is a mark to show the difference in their religious career as against non-followers and followers of different sects. This coming out loud as a follower of a sect through greetings can be seen at some level as a need to stand out from the rest. This almost takes a competitive turn much like the competition among the Gurus they follow in this age of ever burgeoning Hindu sects. While everyone from the sect greets using this phrase, "Sath Sahib" can often be heard chanted by the followers when they are on their own and alone. It doubles as a peace providing mantra to be recited frequently.

This brings us to the question of what actually it means or to be more correct what do these followers mean by it? What do they make of it? Almost every respondent spoke about 'Sath' in a matter-of-factly way making it difficult to grasp the essence with which it was being used. Some spoke of it as an abstract yet a divine thing to be achieved, some as a state of peace or a peaceful parallel dimension, some as a divine being and while some as the spoken truth or word of the god. It turned out that more we tried to find out about it, the more nebulous it seemed to emerge. But a comprehensive definition could be gathered by Mrs. Daya Kor, who put it as "the single unifying truth, a supreme truth that represents a formless supreme being". The 'Sath' is the true essence of the world; it is the universe without illusions and is the only one.

In Jharoda we met a number of people who were followers of Mahraj Surrender who comes from the broader tradition of Kabir Panth of the Bhakti movement of 15th century. Kabir Panth or The Path of Kabir, is a monotheistic tradition based on the teachings of the 15th century mystic Kabir, whose ideas and principles once caught the imagination of a large number of Hindus and Muslims. It is in his teaching that one can easily locate the concept of

‘Sath’. Sath of Satya or the truth has some basic analytical features like it has to be singular, unknowable until known, unachievable until achieved and so on. However another informant Jai Prakash (37 years old) on being asked about the ways to reach or achieve it, he puts it “of course there are multiple paths to ‘Sath’! However the truth is obviously only one. Each man may have his own road to it but it is still one”.

NEED FOR A SPIRITUAL GURU

While the concept of ‘Sath’ is all too important when one joins the sect, it is the very need to join the sect that brings us to our research question. We came across a fascinating cultural aspect in Jharoda Kalan in the form of a need to have a spiritual Guru felt by most of the people living there. This village boasts of its own Guru, Ramdas, who as the story goes, kept meditating for years and got submerged under grass and sand only to be found alive years later. A photo of this Guru on a tile could be found on front façade of almost all houses of this village.

Equally ubiquitous in the village is this sense of need for a spiritual Guru. As Jai Prakash made us understand by recounting a story he was told in one of the Sathsangs (spiritual gatherings) he attended. He told that every human being had three teachers or Gurus in his/her life. First one is the parents who give us our first lessons in this life. Second is the school teacher who prepares us for the worldly affairs ahead for us. Third and the final teacher is the one that will make us realise and help achieve Sath. It is this Guru that one must actively search for as only he can provide us with connection with the higher being. Jai Prakash is himself looking out for such a Guru for his family by proactively going to sathsangs of different Gurus and ‘analysing’ them. This agency on the part of potential devotees is fascinating and breaks down the notion of spiritualism being forced down on people in such societies. As can be seen with Jai Prakash who when asked if his only son would follow the same Guru as he would follow, the reply that came was “it is the duty of every human being to search for the Guru that suits him, and so would my son. Although we would like him to choose the one that we follow but ultimately it would be his choice only.”

In Jharoda Kalan we found respondents with similar disposition who continue making these choices based on a number of socio-culturally governed ideas of spiritualism and gurus. This forms the basis of ‘analysing’ as mentioned in the above case of Jai Prakash. Accessibility of a guru came out as one of the main factors that lead one to choose him. In this age of Television Gurus surrounded with huge convoys of devotees, trust administrators and media people, are seen as superficial by these people. There is a huge distrust for such Gurus and hence a totally opposite conception of Guru is what these people increasingly seek out for. They have a shared idea of a Guru who lives out of a ‘Jhopri’ or hut, who lives an austere life and treats every devotee equally with no special attention to anyone unlike the international Gurus who “segregate their devotes into VIPs and non-VIPs.” Accessibility is demanded in both physical and spiritual dimensions. It is highly important that people see their Guru up close and regularly and equally important is the spiritual connection being rekindled every now and then through regular Sathsangs.

The other spiritual Guru and his followers we studied in our research was Prem Rawat Maharaj. His sect broadly inspired by Kabir panth is quite famous with huge following across the globe. Earlier his father was the head of the sect and hence was the spiritual Guru, passing on the mantle to his son Prem Rawat later on. This sect has an ashram spread across 50 acres

among other farmhouses of posh South Delhi area and goes by the name Raj Vidya Kender. In Raj Vidya Kender the disciples of the guru Prem Rawat Maharaj concurred on the importance of a guru however there was a crucial distinction. One of the first informants there, Mr Phoghat, said “brother, if the truth is one how can there be more than one guru?!” The followers echoed these feelings at various points. Their sense of exclusivity was in marked difference to the attitudes we encountered earlier Jharoda Kalan. Another follower who we interviewed multiple times Tomar Nath said “The world is coming to an end and every man must find the one Sath. It is the truth that can only be attained with help of our Guru.” This exclusivity of the so-called ‘Premis’—as the followers of Prem Rawat Maharaj like to call themselves, is in marked contrast to the ideas of the Kabir Panthis (and affiliates) we encountered in Jharoda Kalan.

The disciples hold that in everyday life an individual could never acquire the knowledge required to achieve a state of peace. Hence one’s eternal salvation depends critically on a Guru. But at the same time there is a large scope for self-analysing various Gurus and finally selecting one. This agency also extends to how assessments are made with regards to the worth of a Guru along the lines of accessibility, style or method of preaching and his own conduct with respect to his teachings. Another factor taken into consideration by people is the method of teachings appropriated by a Guru. The agency on the part of potential followers is best summarised by another informant, Lakshmi Gulia (age 70), by saying “Paani peeo chaankar aur Guru banao jaankar”. This translates to “Like the way we drink water only after filtering it, same is the way we should first know the Guru before selecting him.”

GYAAN

While the need to be a follower and have a spiritual Guru is widespread, it is the knowledge or Gyaan that is what is ultimately sought from the Guru. It is what is needed to attain Sath or the ultimate truth. As the various followers claim, Gyaan is knowledge achievable only through a Guru and it is the compass with which one navigates through life.

Ritesh Dahiya, a devotee of Prem Rawat Maharaj, gives the essence of Gyaan in the life of a devotee and in this case a Premi. Gyaan for her is the knowledge we are unaware of and it is almost impossible for us to know it by ourselves without the spiritual help. It is paramount as it gives our life a much needed direction, because most of the people don’t ever get to know the purpose of their life.

While when asked with similar questions regarding Gyaan as were asked about Sath, most devotees talked in abstract terms and couldn’t pinpoint the concept. But on a closer look and with repeated questioning we understood the two dimensions in which Gyaan is supposed to work. First is of course the spiritual level which deals with all the abstract ideas of Gyaan, but the second level is the worldly level which stands out conspicuously. At worldly level it is defined more by what should not be done than what ought to be, like giving up on alcohol and non-vegetarian food. Gyaan is something that transforms the individual who receives it. The seeker of Gyaan or the novice is called a ‘Jigyasu’ (seeker) whilst the initiated is called a ‘Premi’ (Lover) this marks the transformation of the old to the new. The ones with the knowledge mark the transcendence of man into a state of both spiritual salvation as well as a worldly perfection. Worldly perfection implies a state of ‘sukoon’ or peace that allows one to

know oneself completely. One who has achieved 'Gyan' finds themselves knowing. Gyaan relates to both worldly perfection as well as spiritual salvation.

SATH SANGH (RELIGIOUS GATHERING)

The spiritual knowledge or gyaan once acquired from the guru is not a permanent state of being. Many disciples said that it is something that has to be maintained and renewed every now and then, "like the daily bath" as one of the interviewee Anitha remarked. These renewals do not happen in the local temple but in particular designated gathering called '*Sath Sangh*' or 'in the company of the truth'. The Sath Sangh is a communal meet of the faithful organised at regular intervals where the devotees gather at a particular location (usually the Guru's ashram) and listen to a lecture delivered by the Guru himself interspaced with several musical numbers that repeat the same themes in the form of catchy musical numbers. These sath sanghs are often the beginning of the path through which a jigyasu decided to transform into a devotee of the particular guru as through such communions, he or she comes across the teachings of the guru reiterated by the guru himself. Such gatherings invoke a sense of spirituality among the devotees and make them view the guru in an altogether different light that distinguish them from the common individuals. An experience narrated by one of our interviewee Daya Kor tells how she felt an instant connection with the supreme being on her first day of attending the sat sang of Maharaj Surrender and how it changed her perspective of life altogether. This has been felt by devotees of other gurus too, and is observed by Maya Warriar as well where she writes: "What they 'experienced' in the Mata's arms during their first encounter, and what they feel repeatedly at each subsequent *darshan*, is this unaccountable emotional catharsis, and for this, for most individuals, establishes unequivocally that there is 'something' about the Mata-that this is no ordinary mortal but somehow, unique, extraordinary and 'divine'". (Warriar 2005: 30) Sath sangh have this universal feature which illuminates the life of the devotees and make them place the guru at an utmost position of guidance.

The kinds of sath sang that we encountered in our fieldwork can be clubbed under two broad divisions. The Sath Sanghs of the more urban Prem Rawat Maharaj were short pre-recorded and daily events that had the specified time of 6-7 pm from Monday to Saturday and 2-3 pm on Sundays. A specific room was designated for the hour long gathering where the professionals played the pre-recorded video of the guru's speech as well as the musical numbers on the projector and the old and young devotees sat on the floor, with the men on one side and the women on the opposite side. As soon as Prem Rawat Maharaj came on the screen, people folded their hands and listened in awe to his words, thus submitting themselves to an hour of devoutness that affects their rest of the day.

Contrary to this, the sath sanghs of the older fashioned Surrender Maharaj were all night long live performances that occur once in a fortnight in different locations around Delhi and its borders near Haryana. In Jhajjar where the *ashram* of Maharaj Surinder is located, we witnessed an all-night jamboree that began from 10 pm and continued till 5 am. It was packed with live musical performances on the evils of idol worship, blind faith in mainstream Hinduism and the dangers of consuming meat and alcohol whilst Surinder Maharaj watched on. Every aspect of the Sath Sangh from the food served there, the seating arrangements and

even the music was all done by the devotees of the guru, which was different from the setup of Raj Vidya Kender where the disciples of Prem Rawat Maharaj were passive participants in the arrangement of the pre-packaged event of sath sanghs.

However the purpose of these gatherings was similar- to reiterate the central ideas of the guru and reinforce the behavioural interdictions that the guru has placed on the devotees as a pre-condition of them maintain their state of 'Gyaan'. The devotees we spoke to in both places felt renewed by these regularly occurring events that reinforced their faith and devotion. Since these associations were not spatial majorities in any one location the sath sangh was also a space for them to feel a certain sense of community. The community of believers which reinforced the faith of the devotees formed itself regularly only at the Sath Sangh. A community where the believers are one with the truth and one with god, surpassing the differences in caste, class, language or others which they have among them.

HOPE FOR THIS WORLDLY BENEFITS (AND THE UNIQUENESS OF THIS MINDSET WITHIN TRADITIONAL HINDUISM)

Traditional Hinduism has certain core ideas that are central to its teaching such as karma, dharma and moksha. Moksha or salvation in Hindu philosophy connotes the idea that inner peace can only be achieved if one frees himself or herself from the cycles of birth and death. This emancipation and liberation can be achieved by giving up worldly ties and embracing an other-worldly life.

But both the spiritual leaders- Maharaj Surinder and Guru Prem Rawat offer the knowledge of the supreme truth (Gyaan) and the resultant self-fulfilment while participating in the *bhrasht* (corrupt) modern world. They emphasized on finding the inner peace and calmness in this life only, without the need to relapse to the simpler days with bare minimum material needs. The teachings imparted by both the gurus are based on how to live a fulfilling life in the modern world itself, which follows a similar course to many other gurus in the contemporary world, one of them being Mata Amritanandamayi, lovingly called Amma by her followers whose "mission is to alleviate humanity's suffering by restoring selflessness, love and compassion to their rightful place in the modern world." (Warrier 2005: 2)

Today's fast paced modern life drains individuals who are constantly battling suffering, pain, ever growing ambitions and needs and other forces that are slowing them down. Such life often calls for the desire to go back to the old days when things were less complicated. This need to live a peaceful life, devoid of negative thoughts in one's mind and facing the vices of the world with a calm and composed mind, body and soul can be fulfilled even in the urban world by the teachings of these leaders. Although the end that both the gurus desire is the same, which is to inculcate a rejuvenating desire in the devotee to live a gratifying life with amity, tranquillity and love, the methods adopted by them are different. Guru Prem Rawat focuses on swaans or inner breathing which he considers to be the road to a fulfilling life. He asks his devotees to give one hour of their everyday life to make the rest of the twenty- three hours productive. The road to a peaceful and beautiful life in this world of commotion lies within the individual, as Guru Prem Rawat says. He can only play the role of a guide and show this path to his followers, and he claims to have shown it to thousands of his disciples

already. The rest has to be piloted by the disciples themselves by connecting to their inner souls, and once they do, they have found the key to attaining what everyone is searching for in his or her life- inner happiness.

Maharaj Surrender, on the other hand emphasises on devotional songs and *dohas* based on the teachings of Sant Kabir to ensure a moral living by denouncing vices like alcoholism and drug addiction which is widespread social issue in the area of Jharoda Kalan which we studied. Devotees narrated instances of how Maharaj solved many previously unsolvable problems encountered by the people such as curing addiction of alcoholism of several men, addressing health issues and giving remedy solutions, marriage problems, to name a few. One particular interviewee told us how she travelled across many villages to meet the Maharaj, who she believed would finally solve her husband's extreme addiction to alcohol. Disciples also believe that this *gyaan* or knowledge enables them to attain their true potential by granting them complete self-awareness of the events occurring around them and in their world and make them able to channelize and control their negative emotions and behaviours.

SECONDARY NATURE OF THE HINDU GODS

Lawrence A. Babb wrote, "for there is not now, nor has there ever been, a theology or philosophy that commands anything remotely resembling a consensus in the Hindu world." (Babb 1987:2) This is true as Hinduism is so vast and comprising of varying beliefs that a universal idea of practicing it does not exist. Yet, there are certain core ideas that are more or less general throughout the population of Hindus. In our field of Jharoda Kalan, where the community was one of Jat domination, the followers of Maharaj Surrender had an interesting rejection of certain of these core ideas related to their community and Hinduism in general.

There is a marked lack of ritualism which is reflected by not carrying out a ritual dear to Jats called *Kanagat* or *Shraad* where families pay homage to their ancestors through prayer and offering of food. Such an annual ritual that is widely celebrated by the people of North India and specially Haryana from where most of our informants descend was out rightly rejected by the devotees of Maharaj Surrender. However the rejection of the supremacy of Hindu gods and goddesses seem to be the most astonishing one. It should be made clear that this rejection does not mean the Hindu mythological stories are not held to be true, such stories and the roles that Hindu deities play there are acknowledged. In fact these mythologies become the basis for contesting their hegemonic positions that they occupy in Hinduism. There is a trend towards monotheism where the focus is on the spiritual saint Kabir and his teachings which are seen as more life enhancing.

We encountered quite a few ethnographical details which highlight this shift from Hindu deities to sant Kabir, one of the most interesting comes from our first informant, Mrs. Dayakor. During a critical period of her life, she recalls how desperately she called upon god and searched for his grace but he didn't come for her aid. While she was going through this tiring period, luckily enough she came across Maharaj Surrender and his teachings on Kabir instilled a new hope and belief in her life. This hope, she could only regain after she came under the fold of Maharaj Surrender and strictly started treading on the paths of Kabir Panthi. She describes how after she found her solace, she saw the the unearthly apparition of Lord

Shiv and asked him in anger his inability to help her during her turmoil. “Why are you here now? Where were you when I needed you? Now go away, I have found peace”

The fact that Maharaj Surrender was influencing such alternate beliefs among his followers became clearer when we got the chance to talk to him during one of our visits to the sath sanghs. In our conversation, he used our common sense judgement to rationalize his teachings. He pictured an image in front of us of a human being carrying a weapon of destruction with him or her and how our judgement will instantly portray him in a negative or villainous role. However, it is our clouded mind that does not enable us to see we are making an irrational exception when the same image is portrayed with gods and goddesses. If such supernatural beings are given the responsibility of maintaining peace in the world, why do they carry weapons that relay the message of destruction? It is ultimately Kabir only and his teachings that can bring peace to this world and it is he who is the true Supreme Being.

Although we didn't particularly witness such outright rejection of rituals and Hindu deities among the followers of Guru Prem Rawat, they certainly lacked the requisite devotion to the pantheon of traditional Hindu gods and goddesses that is seen among other Hindus.

REMARKS/OBSERVATIONS

- Though Devotees are quite clear that they are Hindus they are also clear that they aren't quite 'conventional' Hindus.

The devotees of these godmen consider themselves as apart from Hinduism and consider themselves closer to the truth than a 'Mainstream Hindu' 'Hanuman wallah' ritualistic and polytheistic Hindu. Though they often acknowledge the possibility of multiple truth claims like Jai Prakash did this is mostly with respect to other Guru cults (especially of the same tradition). The 'reeti-rivaaj' or ritualism of Hinduism does put them off to a great extent. However this separation from Hinduism isn't complete. Both the gurus and their followers accept the existence of Hindu gods (though they doubt their ability to intervene in the lives of men). In a context where they are confronted by distinctly non-Hindu identities we observed that devotees often retreated to some form of Hindu identity. On our last day of fieldwork we noticed how several devotees of Surinder Maharaj derided the Shirdi Sai Baba for being a so-called Mohammadan. A true Guru would have to have his origins in the Hindu faith they held (oddly enough Sant Kabir is also believed to have been a Muslim by many historians; a theory that most devotees we mentioned it to rejected as a lie).

The devotees of Prem Rawat Maharaj too were broadly within the tradition of Kabir Panthi and did differentiate themselves from conventional Hinduism. However they did not reject the primacy of the Hindu gods as out rightly as the followers we met in Jharoda Kalan. Many still held on to worship of some Hindu deities, most notable among them being Shri Krishna.

- Devotees see the **Guru as a vehicle to salvation** both in the spiritual realm and even in this 'brasht' (corrupt) realm which is how they see the 'modern' world.

Most of our respondents spat the word ‘modern’ out of their mouths and associated all the social evils that surrounded them as effects of that malignant force. As Warriar postulated these devotees too see the modern world as something that broke and alienated the individual. This is where the Guru was seen as important. The guru could help the victims of modernity overcome its ill-effects by re-integrating them into a divine community – that of the body of believers who would help them overcome their afflictions. This was a theme we observed in Satsanghs of both godmen where there were several people struggling with substance abuse related problems like drug addiction and more commonly alcoholism. Alcoholism especially is seen as something almost supernatural which would possess certain innocent victims. This was seen by the believers as effects of modern life that corrupted and alienated the individual. The blessings and re-integration into community offered by the guru was seen as the only way these torments of modernity could be overcome.

- Though a devotee can acquire membership in a guru sect through birth or even marriage there also exists a parallel belief in the necessity for the individual to find his/her own guru by a **complex process of searching**

Membership in a guru sect can be acquired through birth, marriage and other involuntary means however there also exists a belief that ‘paani piyo cchane ke, guru banao jaan ke’ (Drink water that has been purified and only follow a Guru after due inquiry). This process of choosing has multiple variables that are culturally determined. Some like Jaiprakash see accessibility as one of the main aspects that helps him make a decision other like Daya Kor made their decision after attending multiple gatherings and finding a message that gave her the greatest peace. Though the exact determinants of what makes an individual follow a guru are very varied but this much is certain that there exists a complex process of inquiry and not just blind faith.

CONCLUSION

Our field work revealed to us a strong undercurrent of inquiry that flows beneath the tides of the supposed blind-faith of the Godmen cults. The devotees in both scenarios claimed to have arrived at their choice of guru via a process of searching, even if it weren’t so as in the case of multiple interviewees who had joined their respective sect after marriage. It was important to the devotees to be seen to be making an active choice based on their inquiries. Wives who had joined their husband’s sects often told us of how they finally found peace only once they joined their new sects. Once chosen the godman was seen to have the ability to not only ensure spiritual salvation but also provide the followers with this worldly benefits by granting them ‘Gyaan’. ‘Gyaan’ was seen by the devotees as something that could improve not only their spiritual status but also their everyday lives by helping them overcome obstacles put in their path by the corruption of modernity. The focus on ‘gyaan’ differentiates the cults of these godmen from mainstream Hinduism to an extent. The differences are further accentuated by the ambivalent (at best) position of Hindu Gods within these sects. All in all the Guru cults are a variegated and colourful corner of Indian spiritual life that defy simplistic

monikers like 'blind faith' and 'superstition'. These cults can be seen as non-conventional religious discourses that provide succour, both spiritual and worldly, to the people who are unsatisfied with the conventional ones.