

Tehelka

Myth busters of Mohali

*In the grip of stultifying superstition, Punjab needs these fearless five to conjure forth an age of reason, says **Nishita Jha***



Firefighter Jarnail Singh Kranti

Photos: Garima Jain

THE MAN in the driver's seat was born in front of PC Sorcar's house. Turning his taxi to the Rationalist Society headquarters in Mohali, he says, "We had heard that Sorcar gained his powers from one book. Whoever read it would go insane for six months, then transform into the world's greatest magician. I kept hoping to find it. It was the only reason I learnt to read." One day, he found a thin journal left in the back of his taxi. "Ghosts that possessed women, talking idols, telekinesis — all the magic in the world explained. I felt as though I had found Sorcar's book," he says.



Neeraj Daun smother superstitions

What Biswas had found, apart from the fulfillment of a childhood dream, was the monthly publication brought out by Tarksheel, the Punjab Rationalist Society.

That Biswas found magic in a rationalist pamphlet isn't the paradox it seems. In their aim to cultivate scientific thought and obliterate superstitions accrued over centuries,

the foot soldiers of Tarksheel are meeting and beating the charlatans and tricksters on their own field. Crowded among the posters of Bhagat Singh, the Tarksheel office is a stockpile of magic tricks — powders that burst into flames, innocuous-looking containers that swallow change, notes and cheques, ointments that cause the appearance of superficial burns and a spool of holy string.

It is one prong of a strategy formulated by the Indian Rationalist Association (IRA), the umbrella organisation of which Tarksheel is a chapter. In addition to more conventional methods like conducting seminars to spread awareness, other arms such as the Satya Shodhak Sabha (Gujarat), Soshit Samaj (Jharkhand) and Jana Vignana Vedika (Andhra Pradesh) also play detective or guinea pig as required. Although it would be convenient to suppose superstitions thrive only in the rural fringes of these states, the metros see their own share of supposed supernatural activity. The head of the Indian Rationalist Association, Sanal Edamaruku, spent close to 23 hours in a studio in New Delhi last year, while a sadhu invited by the news channel pranced around, muttering a curse that would supposedly end Edamaruku's life on air. This April, he faced the ire of the Organisation of Concerned Catholics when he unravelled a 'miracle' at a church in Mumbai. Edamaruku discovered that the droplets of water trickling from a statue of Jesus Christ in Vile Parle were, in fact, from a nearby drainage system, and is currently facing arrest for 'blasphemy'.

The largest presence in the Tarksheel office is that of Jarnail Singh Kranti, a retired primary schoolteacher and trade union activist who was initiated into the Society in 1984, while translating AT Kovoov's books into Punjabi. Kovoov, an Indian professor of Botany in Sri Lanka, had spent his post-retirement years hunting out and exposing godmen — the most famous of these showdowns was Kovoov's meeting with Sathya Sai Baba of Puttaparthi. The apocryphal story goes that Kovoov matched Sai Baba miracle for miracle, finally asking him to produce something he couldn't hide up his sleeve, a pumpkin — the baba walked away. Impressed with Kovoov's work, Kranti founded the Chandigarh chapter of the IRA and began distributing translated titles (*Begone Godmen, Gods, Demons and Spirits, The Miracle of Ganga Water*) at schools and local functions. Soon, he had a small army of rationalists and 11 districts around Chandigarh under his watch. The Tarksheel Society has now published over 200 titles in Punjabi, Hindi and English on similar themes.

Due to the kinds of complaints Tarksheel receives — which Kranti broadly classifies as sexual, financial, social and traditional — discretion and cultural sensitivity are of prime importance. While the society has its panel of legal and medical advisers, the core investigating team consists of Kranti ("People trust me because I am old," he offers), Satnam Singh Daun (an untrained hypnotist, magician and detective-at-large), Daun's wife Neeraj (who represents another useful demographic — 90 percent of Tarksheel's cases involve troubled women), journalist Harpreet Rora and his wife Harvinder. Except for Kranti, who works at the Tarksheel library full time, everyone else has a day-job, through which they fund the society's activities. Kranti says with some pride that all the core team members have had 'court-registered, inter-caste love-marriages' — convinced that this is an indicator of their commitment to a rationalist cause.

THE LION'S share of cases on Tarksheel's investigative roster involves 'possessed' women. Rora says the easiest way to discourage women from moving around freely or mingling with the opposite sex is to instill fear in the form of supernatural repercussions from an early age. The myths that proliferate in villages are centred on feminine virtue and its containment. Oft-repeated ones include djinns love women with open hair, or those who wear perfume, or new brides. Walking under a peepul tree at midnight or when everyone is asleep in the afternoon is a sure way to get possessed.

Upon investigation, the root causes of possession are more humdrum: related to guilt, an unsatisfactory sex-life, lack of sex-education and an unconsciously-repressed rebellion against patriarchal rules. For instance, two of the possessed women Daun and his wife met recently, one a village girl, the other a lecturer at Chandigarh University, were pregnant and under tremendous psychological pressure to bear sons. The village girl's clothes would 'spontaneously' catch fire, and the college lecturer would speak in a voice distinct from her own, threatening to kill her unborn child.

Daun usually begins his interaction with the 'patient' by establishing himself as a holy man, appealing to the same subconscious mechanisms that created the 'ghost'. His favourite trick involves swallowing fire. By this stage, the Tarksheel investigators have familiarised themselves with the family's history to arrive at a logical working hypothesis for the patient's behaviour. Having assuaged the supposed spirit, Daun then confronted each of the women with facts from the investigation. The village girl was dissatisfied with her marriage. The college lecturer was overworked and unappreciated. Overwhelmed by this direct handling of their actual problem, they both confessed and thus expounded their demons.

In most cases, the possessed women are relieved to be freed of their psychological burden. In the event that the 'ghosts' prove to be stubborn, Daun uses hypnotism to coax the facts before a final confrontation. Once in a while, the myth-busters of Mohali will let the suggestion of a greater power linger, though it goes against the grain of their tenets. As a precautionary measure in case of pregnant women, Daun and Neeraj led the mothers-in-law to believe that a terrible curse would befall them if the girls were tormented for bearing daughters.



The real thing (From left) Satnam Singh Daun, Harpreet Rora and Harvinder Kaur

Not all of Tarksheel's cases are tied up quite as neatly. Kranti recalls a village near Manimajra where cattle would turn up dead every morning, causing intense panic among the villagers. For nearly three weeks, the sarpanch had forbidden anyone from entering or leaving the village, hoping to nab the culprit — to no avail. "The villagers were almost ready to kill each other by the time we were called in," says Kranti, "We knew that if we could not solve this case, we would lose a lot more than our reputations." It took a three day stake-out. The team discovered that the cleaning woman had made a deal with the leather-worker (*chamaar*) of the village where she would poison one animal a day while cleaning the stable, and he would pay her a percentage of the money he made off its hide. "The upper castes were worried about which god they had offended, not realising it was the lower castes that wanted revenge," Daun finishes the story amid laughter.

Cattle deaths are a common cause and symptom of hauntings in villages. Miles away in Dharmapuri, Chennai, a group of villagers locked themselves up in their homes after dark for over four weeks, convinced a "blood-sucking vampire" was killing their animals. Another team of Rationalists, led by Thagadur Tamilselvi, camped out near the stables for three weeks and discovered that contaminated water was the culprit.

The Tarksheel gang doesn't always wait to be called when there's something strange in the neighbourhood. Taking their cue again from AT Kovoov, who offered a prize of \$901 for anyone who could provide any evidence of the paranormal, the society ups the ante; Rs 5 lakh for proof of possession of psychic or supernatural abilities. "We don't have that kind of money at the moment," grins Rora, "but we're quite certain we won't have to pay up." Kranti adds seriously, "If we do, we can always arrange it," but more as testament to the legitimacy of the offer than a concession that such powers exist.

THERE IS a serious need for the Rationalists. In Punjab, highly educated, wealthy families (often those settled in foreign countries) visiting 'gurus' and 'dera babas' in their 'pinds', and making huge donations every visit is a well-documented phenomenon. "We don't care what they do with their crores, but it is shameful that they need to see an uneducated charlatan before making a business decision, or to ensure that their wives give birth to sons — how is this progress?" says Neeraj, visibly irritated. Punjab is also home to a booming ojha business — men who claim they can get rid of any kind of evil spirit or curse. They also extort money, property deeds and gifts from people, while subjecting them to humiliation as part of their cure. One of Kranti's first cases, Jitender Singh, a bank employee who lost his job and became depressed, was beaten, stripped and mocked by a group of such ojhas because his wife's family insisted that this was the only way in which he could be 'cured'. Singh, now a recovering psychiatric patient, says he had begun to seriously contemplate suicide around the time that Kranti found him, and insisted that he seek medical intervention. "There are very few trained psychiatrists in Punjab and there is still a lot of stigma attached to seeking counselling. I think it's one of the main reasons that young working professionals turn to drugs and alcohol for respite," he says.

The nexus between political parties and religious figures adds another dimension — the latter guarantees votebanks while the former ensures protection from the law. "No government till date has tightened the 1954 Drugs and Magic Remedies Act,

under which the maximum punishment is two months in prison and a Rs 2,000 fine,” says Daun. Instead, the Rationalists are seen as godless and amoral people. Edamaruku has been vilified in the past for echoing Kovoov’s claims that Sathya Sai Baba was a con-artist. Under Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal’s government, Tarksheel’s publications were banned for a few months as seditious, when a rationalist society member managed to annoy a BJP MLA by challenging his party’s resident soothsayer.

Daun believes that people hate Rationalists because they ask too many pesky questions. “No one wants a poor man to ask why he is poor. Everyone just wants him to accept his fate because that is the only way the rich can survive without fear,” he says. It is easy to see why an apolitical, irreligious and socialist group should cause tremors in the corridors of earthly power. Meanwhile, for newly converted rationalists like Biswas the taxi-driver, the world of logic is simply magical.

With inputs from Jeemon Jacob

Nishita Jha is a Correspondent with Tehelka.

nishita@tehelka.com