

## **INDIA: Law is no exception to god-men or god-women**

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In India, yet another controversy has erupted concerning a spiritual guru. While this time it involves a god-woman from the southern state of Kerala, otherwise the script is an oft-repeated one.

The emergence of a person claiming spiritual and god given powers from a remote hamlet in the country to national and international prominence over a period of time; an estranged early disciple breaking off from the sect; and authoring a memoir throwing light into the otherwise unknown inside aspects of the guru as well as the guru's inner circle, alleging crimes of varying nature including sexual violence and financial misappropriation; and the government going out of the way, beyond the mandates of law, to protect the cult and the persons leading it.

Many countries in the world have had their share of gurus and spirituality driven movements, most of them later exposed as mere spin-offs, led by fraudsters. Perhaps in this list, India stands remarkably high up. India is home to controversial persons like Mr. Sathyanarayana Raju, who was alleged of crimes including being a paedophile; or before him, Mr. Chandra Mohan Jain, who was accused of masterminding a bio-terror attack - the first confirmed instance of bio-terrorism in the United States; and their modern day counterparts like Mr. Asumal Thaumal Harpalani, notorious for rape charges and absconding. The country is fertile ground for such money swindlers and racketeers.

What they all have in common is their ability to get away with their crimes with relative ease, organize for investigations to be stalled, and prevent prosecutions. They all exhibited the same skill in dodging the criminal justice process in India. They all basked in their high-profile political clout, to the extent that no one dared to question them, their cult, or its activities. All of them have spoken in international forums, some at the United Nations, or are referred to as exemplary examples of humanitarian activists, like Satyanarayana Raju, who was repeatedly appreciated by the UN for his water supply programmes, while his otherwise unknown side of life was involved in deep criminality.

A book authored by Ms. Gail Tredwell, alleges that she was raped repeatedly by one of the leading personalities in the cult led by a god-woman from Kerala that she once followed, and further that the woman she believed to be her spiritual guru was in fact also engaged in criminal activities. Once the book hit the stands, and as expected in any healthy democracy, public opinion and debate for and against the book and the cult movement swelled.

What was appalling and unacceptable however, was the state government going out of its way to silence public opinion against the cult. Moreover, the Home Minister of Kerala underlined his government's subjugation to the cult by declaring that it would not take any criminal actions against the cult or its leadership. The Chief Minister has said that before one criticizes the cult, one should remember the good deeds it has under its belt. If this logic is to be agreed as a legal standard, one of the first persons who should be exonerated, against whom there is a serious criminal charge pending, is Mr Tarun J. Tejpal. Under the leadership of Tejpal, the organization that he led, Tehelka, exposed a large number of political corruption and mal-governance instances in India.

Amongst other things Tredwell has alleged in her book crimes of a serious nature against the cult that she once followed. Some of them have direct and possible consequences that could endanger the security of the nation. Some of these crimes are of such gravity that the statute of limitation does not apply to them.

The government has the fundamental duty to investigate these allegations. Ministers who act against the constitutional mandate that they are bound to uphold and have sworn allegiance to before assuming office, that is to uphold the rule of law, must be prosecuted for breaching their constitutional promise.

Furthermore, such statements will demoralize the state police. State opposition to a legal obligation to promptly investigate an allegation of crime merely serves to promote criminality.

Once a crime is committed, however small it might be, any amount of good deeds performed cannot exonerate the criminal. The power to acquit and convict a person lies with the judiciary in India. Or, are there two sets of laws in India, one for the ordinary citizen and another for the god-men and god-women?