

## Faith versus Superstition

■ Dr. M. N. Buch

India is a deeply religious country where the Sanatan Dharma based religions, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism coexist happily and peacefully with the Semitic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, as also with the Zoroastrian faith and atheism, nature worship or even paganism. Article 25 of the Constitution gives every Indian the right to practice, preach and propagate the religion of his choice, or not to do so if that be his preference. What it does not advocate is superstition, worship of individuals to the point of deification or promotion of practices which have no logic, no rationale, not even scriptures which are held sacred. That is why Part IV A of the Constitution prescribes as one of the fundamental duties of citizens the mandate “to develop the scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform”.

What is science? As per the Chambers Twenty-first Century Dictionary it means “the systematic observation and classification of natural phenomena in order to learn about them and bring them under general principles and laws, any area of knowledge obtained using, or arranged according to, formal principles”. Religion based on logic or beliefs which have a base of tradition which is capable of being understood has an element of science in it. If a religion permits debate, as does Islam through Ijtehaad or the Sanatan Dharma through a Dharma Sansad, then that religion can be said to encourage inquiry and reform. If, however, the followers of a sect are required to believe blindly in what the leader of the sect states or demands, with no questions being permitted, then at one level it is bigotry and at another it is superstition. In a country which constitutionally states that it is secular and whose Constitution demands of all citizens that they promote the scientific temper there is no room for either bigotry or superstition. Our misfortune is that we seem to be suffering from a surfeit of both.

The latest in a long line of superstition based actions is the charade being enacted at Daundiya Kheda village in Unnao District of U.P. Some sadhu called Shobhan Sarkar has stated that he had a dream in which Raja Ram Baksh Singh of Buxar who had participated in the 1857 war and was hanged by the British in 1861, told him that he had buried 1000 tonnes of gold in village Daundiya Kheda near the temple and the fort there. The current value of the gold would be approximately rupees three lakh crores. The sadhu’s dream was taken so seriously that Akhilesh Yadav, the Chief Minister of U.P. sent a senior emissary to meet the Baba and the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) decided to dig for the treasure. The Unnao district administration made elaborate security arrangements, A.S.I. began the dig, thousands of villagers have congregated to watch the tamasha and the national and international media has descended on the village to watch the nation make a fool of itself over a so-called Baba’s dream.

What is a dream? The Chambers Twenty-first Century Dictionary defines it as under, “series of unconscious thoughts and mental images that are experienced during sleep; a state of complete engrossment in one’s own thoughts; “. Psychiatrists and psychologists do analyse dreams because they can open the locks of the hidden in the individual id, but a dream which speaks of a hidden treasure whose whereabouts are revealed by a person who died 152 years ago can only be either pure fantasy or, worse still, a deliberate attempt to deceive people steeped in superstition. By any logical construction the so-called dream of

Shobhan Sarkar is a naked and unabashed appeal to superstition, which word is defined by the same dictionary as “a belief in an influence that certain (especially commonplace) objects, actions or occurrences have on events, people’s lives, etc.” That the dream in question had an influence on the lives of many people is evidenced by the way ASI started digging for treasure.

One thousand tonnes of gold as the hidden treasure of a petty chieftain! He had no gold mines nor ruled an empire. How did he collect so much gold? He was on the run. How did he excavate a hole large enough to safely bury so much gold? A thousand tonnes of weight cannot be handled by manual labour alone. What sort of machines did the Raja assemble to lift such a weight? A person with commonsense would ask these questions before proceeding further. A superstitious person would accept the Baba’s dream as gospel. Archaeology is a scientific discipline as defined by the Chambers Twenty-first Century Dictionary. The exact definition is “the excavation and subsequent study of the physical remains of earlier civilizations, especially buildings and artefacts, which now benefits from advances in scientific technologies such as carbon dating”. ASI, an organisation founded by Mortimer Wheeler and Sir John Marshall, which has won international acclaim through its work in Angkor Wat and Borobudur, the very ASI which has conserved all of India’s ancient monuments which were facing oblivion, asked none of these questions and instead went digging for gold, even if proves to be fool’s gold, because a Baba had a dream.

Charandas Mahant, who had been a minister in Madhya Pradesh and is at present Minister of State for Agriculture in the Union Cabinet, as also President of the Chhattisgarh Pradesh Congress, made a public statement on the national channels of TV in which he stated that there was nothing wrong with what ASI was doing in Daundiya Kheda on the basis of the Baba’s dream because after all it is tantra, mantra and yantra which drive Indian society and its government. He completely forgot Article 51A of the Constitution, especially sub-clause (h). Superstition forms part of no religion because it does not have the logic and rationale of religion which focuses on a particular form of divinity and is thus the very antithesis of religion. This means that even if India were a theocratic State there would be no place for superstition or blind faith in an individual claiming to have a direct pipeline to God. India, however, is a secular republic as stated in the Preamble to the Constitution. The U.S.A. is also a secular republic and the words of Amendment I of the Constitution are, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof”. This is very similar to our own Preamble and Article 25 of the Constitution. In such a state mantra, tantra and yantra have no place whatsoever and Charandas Mahant is clearly out of order when he refers to them. He is a minister and under Article 75 it is mandatory for him to be a Member of Parliament or to be elected thereto within six months of his appointment. Under Article 84 only a citizen of India qualifies to be a Member of Parliament, which means that Charandas Mahant is such a citizen. Therefore, the fundamental duties prescribed in Part IVA of the Constitution, viz., Article 51A, are as applicable to Charandas Mahant as to any other citizen. As a citizen and a minister it is his duty to develop the scientific temper and the spirit of enquiry, not to go around justifying the action of the ASI because some Baba had a dream of treasure. As it is, ASI is required to resurrect our past and make us aware of it and of our heritage. It is not its job to go treasure hunting, unless the treasure has archaeological significance.

What message does the present excavation in Daundiya Kheda send to all Indians and to the rest of the world? That India is so steeped in superstition, that those in power do not even raise questions about superstitious beliefs, nor seek justification, logic and rationale of such beliefs? How can this country progress if all its actions are to be determined by soothsayers, Babas, swamis, fakirs and charlatans masquerading as holy men and other fraudsters out to make quick buck from a gullible people. What is a sadhu? He is a person who lives an austere life, renounces all possessions, who has devoted his entire life in search of that which is sacred. A true sadhu is one who reaches a stage in life when all that is material is irrelevant and spirituality is the very centre of his being. Sadhus are not supposed to dream about things like buried gold. Adi Sankara was a true sadhu whose sadhana resulted in a revival of the Sanatan Dharma which had suffered badly with the rise of Buddhism. Dayanand Saraswati was a sadhu whose Arya Samaj brought equality and modernity to Hinduism. Maulana Azad was a sadhu whose innate decency and catholic vision of religion gave us the true form of Islam in which Allah is the embodiment of compassion. I make this point because in the hearts and minds of these great religious leaders there was no room for superstition or blind faith. In fact every religion has room for debate, in Islam through Ijtehaad, in Hinduism through a Dharma Sansad, in Christianity through a religious conclave and in Sikhism through the sangat. The whole concept of dialogue is that learned people congregate to discuss religious issues and the scriptures, even revealed scriptures, because the Almighty has given human beings a brain and the ability to distinguish between right and wrong. That is why even deeply religious people are expected to understand the basic tenets of their faith and not blindly follow interpretations by people who are themselves not equipped to interpret and who, therefore, fall back on dogma, blind faith and outright superstition. We have to guard against this if we are to be a modern nation.

To revert to Daundiya Kheda, ASI is now resorting to subterfuge in order to cover up its own stupidity in hunting for treasure at the behest of a sadhu who claims to have a dream which, at best, can only be a hallucination or a figment of imagination. First ASI said that the excavation was undertaken because the Geological Survey of India (GSI) had indicated the presence of metal in the area. GSI denies this, thus bringing the credibility of two fine institutions into question. Then ASI changes tack and states that it is not looking for gold but rather for evidence of a Kushan era settlement. Why it was felt that Daundiya Kheda is built on top of first century A.D. Kushan era settlement as never been clarified. So far ASI has come across some broken bangles and remnants of pottery, as also a wall which could either be a curtain wall or a partition wall. What is the depth of the dig which has been planned? There is no explanation. What are the reasons for suspecting the existence of a first century settlement? There is no explanation. Why was Daundiya Kheda chosen otherwise than because of the dream seen by Baba? There is no explanation. For that matter, who is this Baba and how has he acquired the status of a sadhu? There is no explanation. In other words, the citizens of India are being taken for a ride, all because someone had a dream. These are certainly not the hallmarks of a modern State. Is that why we prefer teaching by rote rather than encouraging students to think for themselves? Is that why the level of research in our top educational institutions is abysmally low? Is that why when there is no money for schools, hospitals and old age homes, we spend enormous sums of money on our festivals, the vulgarisation of which has to be seen and, more appropriately, heard to be believed. Does all this fit within the true meaning of the religion?

Narendra Modi said the right thing when he strongly criticised the excavation at Daundiya Kheda on the basis of a sadhu's dream. Electoral cowardice compulsions forced him to retract his words and virtually prostrate himself before the Baba. According to me this has spoilt his copy book and raised doubts whether he will be able to clear the cobwebs of superstition, corruption and bad government in India. It has certainly put the UPA government in a bad light, to be seen as a supporter of the excavations at Daundiya Kheda. It is time for right thinking citizens to campaign against blind faith and restore to India its true spirituality. Incidentally, I would like to mention that the only sane person in this entire episode seems to be Dr. Rekha Singh Bakshi who is said to be descendent of Raja Ram Baksh Singh. She has said that there is no buried treasure at Daundiya Kheda. There may be some bits of silver and copper, parts of utensils used in those days, but certainly there is no gold buried at the site. Will ASI listen to her voice of sanity?

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