

MUTTS OF CRIME

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Tradition binds them to austerity, but opulence is their way. They are sworn to celibacy, but marry they do and have children. Attaining salvation is their ultimate goal, but for property they aim. In politicians they trust and on criminals they rely. They are the mahants (head priests) and sadhus of the thousands of mutts in Ayodhya and other parts of eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The mutts, there are no fewer than 8,000 in Ayodhya and about 7,000 in Bihar, are an industry by themselves, with some like the Gorakhpur Temple in Uttar Pradesh raking in offerings worth Rs 50,000 each day.

MUTTS OF CRIME, KANHAIYA BHELARI

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The personnel of the Special Task Force of the Uttar Pradesh police recently had a tough time in Ayodhya when they visited different mutts. Gone was the bonhomie witnessed earlier when they were greeted in a royal fashion on their earlier visits. Of course looking at the job at hand they had to endure the cold reception.

In fact they were on lookout for some persons, including some sadhus who were allegedly involved in a bank robbery. A team of robbers had looted ten lakh Rs from the *The Grammen Bank* in Gonda and the police had discovered that members of the Mahant Arun Sadhu gang were allegedly involved in the operation. Police also had definite leads which revealed that the same gang was also involved in many other cases of kidnapping and extortion. The modus operandi of the particular gang was very simple : committ a crime and take refuge in temples to escape themselves from the clutches of police. (Police Search Temples Looking for Bank Robbers, *The Hindu*, May 11,2008)

The deprecations of the Mahant Arun Sadhu gang reminded one of an earlier flareup when rival groups of Mahants had tried to slug it out in public for control over temple trusts. A writeup in prominent daily (*The Telegraph*, Thursday, February 03, 2005) had provided graphic details of the fight :

'On Monday night, rival groups of Deoram Das Vedanti and Nrityagopal Das opened fire near Ramballabh Kunj temple, injuring the former, police said. Deoram is in hospital.

Tension was simmering between the authorities of the temple 's Janki Jivan Trust, believed to be cash-rich, and Nrityagopal's Mani Ram Das Chavni Akhara over the trust's control.

The rivalry spilled over after a meeting on January 31, when the two rival chief priests came to blows, prompting their associates to draw out double-barrel guns and fire. Deoram, an accused in an old criminal case, was hit in the shoulder.

Earlier, in 2001, Nrityagopal had survived a bomb attack in the ongoing dispute over the trust.'

It was the same time when police in Lucknow had said that they were looking for another Mahant, Shyam Shukla alias Shyam Maharaj who had played the role of a kingpin in the abduction of a Kanpur industrialist Ravinder Kedia and two of his associates. Kedia was released only when he paid a ransom of Rs 18 lakh.

For close watchers of the Ayodhya situation, the disputes over temple trusts can be construed as a routine affair. It was not for nothing that the Faizabad police had been directed by its higherups to remain ever vigilant over such increasing cases of rivalries between temple managements, infiltration of such

establishments by criminal elements and the free flow of arms among Mahants and their associates. It does not appear surprising that there is clamour for gun licences among different temple trusts. A three year-old figure states that at least 350 Ayodhya residents, most of them are temple-trust heads, have acquired licensed arms.

Rivalries between rival temple trusts have even witnessed killings also. In 1994, mahants Ram Pratap Das and Prem Narayan Das were killed following a clash over land. The year before, a temple priest was murdered at Janki Ghat. In 1995, another priest, Ram Arghya Das, was murdered, followed by that of Ramkirpal Das in 1996.

Definitely all those people who have felt deeply worried about the manner in which majoritarian forces have vitiated the composite past of the historic city of Ayodhya would feel further disturbed by the criminalisation of the saffron fraternity.

The seven-year-old study done by Kanhaiya Bellary had revealed a few interesting facts about the mutts in Ayodhya and Bihar. According to him "More than 40,000 'holymen' live in the mutts in Ayodhya. Of them more than 60 percent of the mahants and over 25,000 sadhus are from Bihar. Most of them are Bhumihars or Brahmins, and they fight over mutt property. Kishore Kunal, IG of the CISF, even said that the Bhumihar mahants of Ayodhya's mutts had hired a number of criminals from the Begusarai belt of Bihar to establish their supremacy among the sadhus in Ayodhya... Police records show that in the last 10 years at least 150 mahants or sadhus have been killed in eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar because of ownership disputes. In Ayodhya alone, 20 sadhus have been killed in the last seven years... There is little that even the police can do about the unholy goings-on in the mutts." (*The Week Magazine*—Cover Story— Nov 23, 1997) During the times of United Front government when Uttar Pradesh was still under President's rule, the district administration of Faizabad had prepared a list of sadhus having criminal cases against them and they found 86 sadhus living in mutts in Ayodhya, who had such cases against them. The same study explained the difficulties faced by law enforcing agencies in curbing the activities going on in many such mutts. A senior police officer had explained 'Raiding a mutt means inviting the wrath of the Hindus.' One can surmise how VHP and other affiliated organizations of the Sangh Parivar which have tremendously benefited from their Ayodhya agitation, have thus legitimized a process where criminality in the garb of spirituality can easily get with politics of hate propagated by them.

It is true that as long as faith rules over reason in the minds of the people the criminals are bound to exploit the situation to their benefit. A nuanced look at the unfolding situation would also reveal that there is lot of overlapping between the two or one can say the conflation of the two trends in very many places.

People like Ramvilas Vedanti, Chairman of the Ramjanmabhoomi trust in Ayodhya, who is famous for making inflammatory speeches against Muslims and the secular fraternity, in a sting operation done by CNN-IBN had appeared as a pastmaster of money laundering and tax evasion in the sting operation. (CNN-IBN Posted Monday , May 07, 2007 at 08:11) He had even shared a secret with the interviewer that he has formed a separate trust to facilitate his work of converting black money to white money for a commission.

Titled 'Godmen turn Conmen, Taxman red' a writeup on the group website had provided details of the sting operation. (CNN-IBN Posted Sunday, May 06, 2007 at 20:30 Updated Monday, May 07, 2007 at 02)

'New Delhi: Spiritual gurus, babas, Godmen-they are known by many names and are often the repository of a collective religious faith in India.

But the faith has been maligned and many who claim to be Godmen, promising to rid lives of evil are nothing short of evil themselves.

After a CNN-IBN-Cobra Post investigation revealed the ugly side of some the most popular Godmen, sharp reactions have been pouring in.

The investigation caught these gurus - Pilot Baba, a former Indian Air Force officer, Vedanti Maharaj, former BJP MP and Guruvayur Surya Namboodiri, who claims to be an astrologer - on camera and showed how they used their positions to launder money by bargaining like an experienced conman.

The Vishwa Hindu Parishad - to which Vedanti owes his affiliation - seemed eager to distance itself from the baba. VHP Vice President Giriraj Kishore said Vedanti was not a part of the VHP and also blamed the media.'

"People like Vedanti are not worthy of being a part of VHP. Also, I think a section of the media is out to malign us. Otherwise what was the need of Shankaracharya being arrested? All this is being done to bring bad name to Hindus. This has nothing to do with religion. Vedanti is not part of any organisation," Kishore said.

One still remembers that the government had then even promised 'swift and strict' action in this case which had shocked the entire country. As things stand today it is clear that despite prima facie evidence, neither the individuals were booked under relevant laws nor the accounts of the Trusts were sealed. □□□