A Sociological Study on God Men: What Draws Devotees of Various Socio-Economic Groups to Ashrams in India?

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Abstract

This paper observes the increasing influence of godmen in India and the socio-economic division among devotees that influences their decision to follow them. The study navigates through various social spheres and predominantly focuses on lower-income groups, middle-income groups, and upper-income groups to piece together the research paper. It focuses on in-depth interviews as a primary source of understanding these differences and is followed by possible deductions of the same, keeping in mind the hypothesis that there is a socio-economic divide in this seemingly secular framework of spirituality and religion, as defined by the devotees. These interviews are narrative analyzed to detect any recurring patterns within the economic groups and the following groups. Constructivism as a theory is used to understand how the arguments put forward by the interviewees are influenced by their social position in society and how they are inclined towards understanding reality on individual terms. The study's findings prove that a possible correlation can be derived between an individual's economic standing and expectations while following a certain godmen.

1. Introduction

Modern theorists proposed that the progressive march of the world towards developments in its various spheres would be marked by the gradual and crucial decline of religion and the sociological role. However, contrary to the propagated idea, religion has managed to penetrate deeper into societal settings and adapt to its changing needs and behavioral patterns by broadening its approach [1]. In India, this transition of religion was popularly led by charismatic gurus and miracle-making godmen who seized society's impressionable minds to gather many devotees [2].

They did so by breaking religion into an approachable institution that did not require intense emotional or physical sacrifice but simply began from within oneself [3]. However, as such, society was divided, to begin with, and continues to be divided between India, broadly based on the socio-economic backgrounds of individuals, which in a self-explanatory manner can be translated into devotees as well [4]. Hence the question arises as to how the various gurus and godmen in the country, irrespective of their reputation, construct a business model that considers the various needs of their devotees based on their different economic backgrounds. This question arises in the face of research studies, which have shown that people from different sociological classes seek an experience unique to their social standing and upbringing. When the ruling elite of our country pinned their hopes on economic development, it is unfortunate that a crushing result had them running into the temptations of an unreal world as offered by godmen [5]. Another constituency as aimed by godmen was the burgeoning middle-class household of the post-Independence era. The intense cultural and social crisis they faced made them an easier target audience to imprint otherworldliness as propagated by godmen. However, another paradoxical group of people was the rationalists and liberals who depended on education to fill in the gaps left behind by social backwardness. However, it is also noticed that a substantial following of godmen happen to be from literate and well-educated sections of the middle class. The paper seeks to understand the influence of a single sphere in an otherwise complicated web of psychological and sociological positioning of an individual and the resulting reality constructed that helps them navigate life as ideated by a stranger [6].

2. Literature Review

Globalization as a phenomenon had repercussions in the very roots of society, leading to a complete rearrangement in terms of social classes, individuals, systems, and the general values and morals propagated. India's growing exposure to the outside world due to its participation in the global community has resulted in a shift in propagating values and principles in personal consumption. It was not too late when globalization as a concept crept into religion. This period was characterized by a visible blurring of the line between the conceptualization of 'god' and 'guru' [7].Globalization had resulted in the amalgamation of various social pillars, religion being one of them. However, it sorts to break down the existing traditional social fabric to create space for the invasion of "consumerism, cyber-culture, new-fangled religions, social fads, and changing work ethics and work rhythms" [8]. This breakdown, however, forced an increasing number of people in the country to fall back on social and moral support, which came in India in the form of easily accessible religious gurus and teachers.

Many religious devotees started to seek comfort and gratification through religion due to their unique position in globalized Indian society. These people often identified themselves as being "culturally rootless, distanced from their tradition by background and education". [9]. As a result, many sought to devote themselves to gurus and self-proclaimed godmen that propagated nativistic tendencies and provided a bridge between traditional concepts of self and the incomprehension faced by a modern individual in today's Indian society. This trend has been especially visible among the educated and prospering middle-class citizens and upper-middle-class citizens. This new sense of consumerist ethos [10], sees many people choose self-gratification as a means while faced with the wide variety of choices in life, including that of religion and its means.

Social capital has been a relevant concept, discussed in length since various sociological opinion leaders such as Durkheim, Weber, Marx, and Simmel. When conceptualizing community in terms of broadly classified types of social capital - the bridging capital where social interactions cross any established sectional or group boundaries and bonding capital where interactions are more frequently observed between people of similar characteristics, there emerges a new angle of study into religion in terms of religious, social capital [11]. While bridging capital, popularly among urban communities, encourages interactions and results in blurring the line between different communities, it also arouses conflict. The conflict has been identified as a fundamental dynamic between the sense of self and community due to globalization efforts and the resulting new definitions of social capital and, in turn, religious capital [12].

It is these global phenomena that allowed gurus to propagate their influence onto countries far and wide. As a result, the concept of 'global Hinduism' flourished, which resulted in one of the most dramatic developments in present-day Hinduism, which "is the growth of popular and high-profile devotional organizations led by charismatic Indian gurus [13]. The more successful of the gurus head vast institutional empires financed by generous donations from hundreds of thousands of affluent devotees both in India and abroad". These organizations have come into the limelight for many reasons, including spiritual teachings and their way of life, controversies ranging from money laundering to sexual abuse cases, so on and so forth [14].

Contrary to popular perspective, another way to look at the situation is how a man or a woman claiming to have god-like abilities manages to attract an entire following from all parts of the world. "The number of *babas, swamis, gurus, bapus, bhagats* and their ilk in India is legion. They evoke fierce loyalties and attract an expanding clientele for a while and then fade away". The idolization of the guru within the community is very strong and can be considered 'delusion at best [15], which can be best explained through the example of Rajneesh's, and while they provide only a broad

understanding into many otherwise microbial movements, the example of the cult-like organization that was set up in Oregon by the disciples of Bhagwan Sree Rajneesh is a representation of the same, nonetheless [16].

"His (Osho) agenda, as I understood him, was simply to raise the consciousness of humanity. That was his goal. That was his effort. That was why he spoke" [17].

Bhagwan Sree Rajneesh, one of the most controversial gurus to have surfaced in the United States of America, often dubbed as 'guru of the Rich' and 'sex-guru', had constructed an entire bureaucratic organization by transforming his charismatic authority into a form of a commodity. His teachings were often rooted in open and uninhibited sexual practices and the satisfaction of both the human mind and soul. He intended to give rise to a new man free from all materialistic practices that had tempted western minds into doom [18]. However, contrary to his teachings and claims, Osho had purchased 93 Rolls Royce's and an empire that amassed 120 million dollars in bank accounts throughout the world. Osho and a few of his followers, including Ma Anand Sheela was later tried and found guilty of tax evasion, immigration violations, arson, poisoning, attempted murder, and a host of various other crimes.

While Osho has depended on his charisma to attract a following, other godmen such as Sai Baba, who was based out of his commune in Puttaparthi, Andhra Pradesh was an archetype of a miracle-working guru who was famous for his ability to materialize *vibhuthi* (sacred ash) out of thin air. Along the same lines, Mata Amritanandamayi, popularly known as the 'hugging guru', encourages her followers to think that she can create miracles. Hence, from the above examples, the idea of 'miracles or the ability to create' is marketed to encourage devotees.

Another category of gurus is the philosophical gurus that appeal to a different stratum of a similar socio-economic group. These gurus are often followed by people who rely on a philosophical understanding of spirituality and do not rely on miracles. These gurus often teach their followers an intricate understanding of the Vedas and other Hindu texts. The third type of gurus is the ones that have currently taken the country by storm with their yoga and meditation practices and related teachings [19].

Asian cultures have imbibed religion that gurus and godmen have deeply carved. However, not all teachings penned down by various religious leaders have landed in controversy or been victims of criticism. The Hindu philosophy is known to greatly celebrate the idea of divinity in each particle in the universe. At least a few prominent ones, Gurus and spiritual leaders, have often revived Hindu philosophical ideas increasingly being lost in contemporary society and preached equality or ecological sustainability. Though embroiled in controversies, we cannot ignore their efforts to revive

the culture using a globalized platform to propagate the importance of yoga and pranayama, popularized in contemporary times by gurus like Baba Ramdev and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. While 'Routinization of Charisma' might have backfired in many aspects, the core ideals of certain gurus, when looked at directly, is to simply enable this society to separate themselves from the concept of materialism and help them attain a sense of spirituality that may be questionable but can be defined as the same nonetheless [20].

3. Methodology

The research aims to analyze and understand the influence of an individual's position in society in terms of their economic background and their decision to follow the footsteps of a guru or godman. It tries to establish any possible interdependence between the two and present the findings to help conclude the same. The following research has been presented with the hypothesis that there is a deep sociological construction that consciously or subconsciously enabled this transition in terms of choice of religious propagation by an individual. It focuses on using constructivism as a theoretical framework to determine whether the above hypothesis stands true depending on the subjects being considered [21]. It presents its findings and interviews of four different godmen and or gurus with a seemingly different business model, namely, Osho (formerly known as Bhagwan Sri Rajneesh), Nityananda, Sri Sathya Sai Baba, and Madhusudhan Sai. This paper uses predominantly two methods of data collection, namely in-depth interviews and documentary data available.

4. In-depth Interviews

The research paper includes in-depth interviews of devotees and individuals employed in the administrative department of actively run ashrams in India to present an unbiased understanding and analysis of the above supposition. This method allowed me to interact with the individuals in question and set up a sociological study on the subject, which provided much guidance while contextualizing their arguments that favor or against the hypothesis [22]. The interviews were taken mostly through telephonic means and online video tools except for a few. Through this process, I was interested in gauging any information or awareness of any observed obvious disparities among the various socio-economic classes and in understanding and tracing back to the reasons as to why they chose to follow the guru or godman in question. Some of the questions that I focused on during the Conversations include what is it exactly that they seek to experience or achieve through this path of defined

spirituality and whether any external factors have played a role in this definition? How often do they visit the ashram, and what exactly draws them to it? Do they prefer to visit the institution on their own, or do family members often accompany them? Which part of the country or world do they come from, and what is their profession? [23].

A total of 20 individuals following various godmen were interviewed. These interviewees were stretched across varying demographics to avoid any inherent biases. Considering the positions held by various interviewees in these institutions and communities, they were given the option of anonymizing their name and the godmen they were following while some chose to initialize their name. A few others requested changing their names, quoting respective statements.

To validate the data procured, we conducted the respondent validation process where the participants were allowed to read through my notes and transcripts to eliminate any discrepancies, which were done to avoid any mistranslation of the remarks while transcribing certain interviews from other languages to English.

5. Documentary Data

In the face of a lack of resources and communicative channels, the paper also quotes various documentaries and existing books, videos, and social media posts relevant to the research. It gives a wider perspective of the study. The sources are introduced and mentioned along with quotations and references as and when used in the paper. While scouring through the various content on the above-mentioned sources, I was mainly focused on determining any behavioral patterns that could have a possible sociological reason that might have prompted their path to defined spirituality [24].

6. Research Questions

1. Has class division determined religious following?
2. How has this difference influenced people's decision to follow godmen?
3. Do these people seek different experiences while accepting a guru based on their socio-economic backgrounds?
4. How do ashrams seek to extend their support across devotees of different socio-economic groups? What do they gain from the same?

7.   Result and Analysis

Table 1 is the sample table showing the patterns.

Table 1 - Sample Table Showing the Patterns Observed in the Three Broadly Categorized Socio-economic Groups

Socio-Economic Group	Word Bubbles / Patterns observed
Lower Income Groups	Acceptance, Miracle, Inclusive
Middle Income Groups	Peaceful, Holy, Spirituality over Religion, Miracle (implied)
Higher Income Groups	Liberating, Freedom, Understanding, Eye-opening, Inner Awakening

7.1. Lower Income Groups

The interviewees from the lower middle class were seen to seek out a path of worship that was accepting and sensitive to their social background. They were also drawn to many miracles practiced by the godmen in question. However, none of the interviewees experienced or saw these miracles firsthand and has constructed their belief on word of mouth or propagated acts of the godmen through publicized accounts of the same. The interviewees from this particular socio-economic background also observed that they were more drawn to spiritual institutions that would help them break through the chains of social class [25].

When asked why they wanted to live and follow their path towards spirituality in such settings, they often referred to instances from their lives where they felt that society deprived them of equal opportunities, which was followed by their introduction to spirituality and the world they constructed, seemingly away from the many social evils plaguing society.

Five of those who were interviewed unhesitatingly identified themselves as members of the lower economic class. While questioned regarding their reasons to pick up spirituality as defined by them, they consciously or subconsciously constructed a utopian reality. Interestingly, individuals following gurus or godmen were surrounded by social settings that encourage deeper conversations and are not prone to questioning the legitimacy of various media expose [26]. Other trends showed that people belonging to this particular social background were helped or witnessed a miraculous coincidence in their lives, predominantly health-related involving immediate family members [27]. Various charity drives run by ashrams gave them more reasons to receive with open arms. The various charity drives run by ashrams give them all the more reasons to receive donations that reach them from devotees of other working classes. Meenakshi, 42, a devotee of Sri Sathya Sai Baba, had

taken her daughter for a medical check-up in the hospital run at the Prashanthi Nilayam that provides subsided treatments. She recalls it was the starting point of her journey into Swami's majestic world [28]". I walked into Prashanthi Nilayam, and I was lost in discipline, acceptance, and energy. I wanted to be a part of it. My daughter was sick, so I knew where my responsibilities lay, so I promised myself that I would come back and work for Swami's cause if and when she gets well. It is nothing short of a miracle that she managed to battle through and become better in a few months. I realized it is to time to go back to Puttaparthi and devote myself to Seva. I have not looked back since, which was 11 years ago" [29].

When asked whether she received monetary help for her daughter's treatment from the devotees of Swami, she said her family had been in contact with the authorities to open a possible call for the donation, which got positive responses. "It is more than the money and the help that I am looking at. It is Swami's grace that my child is well. He invited me into his world, and I could have never been more thankful. On the other hand, the people have followed Swami's footsteps and find it needful to give back to society, and I am merely a recipient. It is not the donation that pulled me to this ashram but the force behind it" [30].

The above example sees the subject constructing reasoning that indirectly associated the donation to the godman and channeled her devotion to the spiritual entity rather than the actual source. This pattern, irrespective of the economic group, was highly visible among most interviewees [31].

Another interviewee, RK, aged 32, a former devotee of Paramahamsa Nithyananda, recalls a similar experience:

"I wanted to attend the Inner Awakening program at the Nityanandam Centre in Bengaluru, but the exorbitant rates pulled me back. It was at a point in my life where I was seeking out answers to many questions, and a friend asked me to check out the program. When I said it was unaffordable, she put me in touch with people who helped individuals visit Nityanandam and experience it."

When asked a similar question as to whether this act drew him to the place, he responded along similar lines,

"I remember being indebted to them initially, but after having attended the program, I remember them telling me that they were merely the vehicle assigned to me by Swamiji (Nityananda) so that I can reach my destined destination. That explanation drew me to the place and the man himself."

He recalls the Inner Awakening program as a "peaceful and life-changing moment in his spiritual journey". When asked why he does not follow the godman anymore, he says,

"I have moved on. I was young and looking for a direction in life and was trying all sorts of things at that point. Visiting Nityananda's ashram back then helped me move forward in life. For that, I will always be thankful for his teachings and sermons. Right now, I have other personal spheres to focus on, and my spiritual journey can wait till a later date."

When we tried to get his insight into the many allegations that the self-styled guru faces and the list of charges piling up against him in various courts, RK said:

"I do not know what the whole world thinks of him, and honestly, it does not matter to me or any of his followers. I was exposed to a community of people that were welcoming and friendly and eager to explore their spiritual direction, which was a nice change from the kind of people I was surrounded at. It was more about the people rather than Nityananda himself. However, I realize, acknowledge and respect that he is the reason the community came together in the first place."

In this case, similar to the previous interviewee, he analyzed his own opinion and understanding and suitably constructed his reality. The remaining three devotees who identified themselves as being from the lower socio-economic class did not receive any monetary help. They got introduced to their godmen through various peer groups. Ramani, 45, a cleaning worker, was introduced to the prayer group of Madhusudhan Sai by her co-worker two years ago. She recalls that her friend found out that she has been suffering in her personal and professional life and invited her to visit the prayer meeting and see if it gave her some peace [32]. She recalls:

"I was scared the first time. I have never followed a guru or ever felt the need to seek one. I was never religious, but it all changed in the past two years. Anything remotely associated with the Swami draws me to these prayer meetings. The people, the ideologies, the narratives, everything. When he speaks to us or even remotely looks in our direction, that moment is serene. You feel exposed as if he is reading you like a book. When he smiles, you feel liberated from any worries or misunderstandings in your life. I know how his being came to be, and though I was never a devotee of Sri Sathya Sai Baba, I knew people who would bring back vibhuthi (grey ash) from his ashram for me. They told me he could produce vibhuthi out of thin air. It made me garner respect and acknowledge his supreme powers. A few years later, here I am."

Each of the devotees mentioned above is seen to have used similar words while describing their experience, deriving a pattern of sorts, which was noticed in the other two devotees as well, namely AK, aged 29, a daily wage worker, and SI, aged 31, a tea stall owner. They are often seen relying on terms that culminate a sense of social acceptance and seek out links that could allow them to interact in a wider social setting and be a part of it. They are also extremely reluctant to answer any

questions regarding various controversies surrounding the ashram or their guru, often claiming that these are false rumors spread by people on "the outside".

7.2. Middle Income Groups

The interviews from the middle-income groups were seen to form a bridge between the needs of the lower and the higher income groups concerning the words used and situations narrated. As per the interviews taken, people from middle-income groups draw a clear distinction between spirituality and religion, which is predominantly observed in individuals between the ages of 18-30. Though they directly do not seek out miracles as a requisite for their belief system, a few of the interviewees did refer to it in passing statements and how it strengthened belief in their gurus. Another interesting pattern observed was that middle-income groups were more open to visiting the ashram with family members and extended family when compared to lower and upper-middle-income classes, which according to many of those interviewed, had strengthened their family and brought them close together. It, therefore, denotes a social construct rather than an individual construct as observed among people from the other two income groups.

SA, aged 22, a recent graduate and freelancer, has been a devotee of Sri Sathya Sai Baba, following her family's footsteps and now, along with her family, visits Muddenahalli where Madhusudan Sai's ashram in Muddenahalli. She recalls every visit to Muddenahalli has been a memorable one because it is the most she spends with her family. She often takes a bus from Bengaluru, where she stays, to the ashram that is an hour away. Her middle-class family consists of her parents and an elder sister, who are all employed. When asked if she felt compelled to follow the religious footsteps of her family, she said, "Though I go to temples and pray daily, I do not consider myself religious. Any religious activity that I am involved in is my obligation to the family and their ideology. Nobody in my family forces me to visit the Sathya Sai Grama. That is my own choice that I look forward to on a routine basis. I am bringing peace to my inner self. The darshan is magical. People from all life paths are chanting the same mantra, and their voices resonate with strength and power. Swami is, of course, the reason why this place came to be so whatever it is that we feel there, at the end of the day, it is all because of him" [33].

The above interview is a clear example of how spirituality and religion have become two different priorities in this generation. A similar response was recorded from two other respondents, namely AA, aged 27, a corporate employee, and TA, aged 24, a student. Both drew the importance of being able to navigate for themselves the social construct of religion. However, they agreed on how

they appreciate the opportunity to retract themselves into this safe space of spirituality and the time they spend with their family while doing so. Commenting on the many controversies around a guru, TA said, "I think everybody knows. It is impossible not to know unless the news and opinions in society blind you. My friends question my family's and my choice of following our guru. The important thing is that I am more at peace when I go to the ashram. The place has done wonders to me in terms of helping me understand what spirituality is and how important it is to navigate that expanse of life. What I have understood is that how I feel is independent of the guru and his teachings. Yes, the place has been constructed based on his vision. However, when an ashram gets built and becomes a popular spiritual hotspot, it becomes more than just the guru's vision. It becomes a unified vision of everyone who visits the place. There might be preaching and learnings, but you are often free to explore these teachings based on your background and experiences."

Similar responses came from the young in middle-income families. It is important to observe that the above interviewees are staying away from popular definitions as defined by society regarding religion and spirituality. This change may or may not be traced to the peer groups they interact with as well increased exposure to a variety of opinions that could be seen compelling them to accept reality but at the same time, weave their construction of the same into this narrative, which could be one of the reasons why an increasing number of young people are facing spiritual or religious dilemmas in society. However, the interviewees falling into age groups 35 and above have a different perception of their understanding of what constitutes a religion [34].

IS, aged 48, is a homemaker. She followed the guru after marriage as her in-laws were devotees. When asked if there was any compulsion from the family, she says,

"When you move into a house where everyone is extremely devoted to a particular god, it becomes really hard for you to question that. Therefore, I did not question it. My life has only become more harmonious since. It is not about what I gain personally from worshipping the godman but about the mere act of worship. When you are young and taught to pray, you do not question it. I can question it now, but there is no need. Praying makes me happy and fulfilled. The devotion for my god is something that I am proud of."

When asked if she finds it necessary to visit the ashram from time to time, she said:

"As we do not live in India, we go to the ashram when we are in the country. When I was introduced to this religious path, it started with idol worship. Our pooja rooms had images and statues, scriptures, and books. Our family visits the ashram every year when we are in India. We stay there for a couple of days, and this time is very important for me."

In this interview, we can detect influences on how the environment is introduced to play an important role in understanding reality as dictated by constructivism theory [35].

Another interviewee, VN, aged 74, a former theatre owner, has been a devotee of Sathya Sai Baba for twenty years. When asked what initially drew him to the godman at a point when his name was still comparatively new to Indian society, he responded by saying:

"My family was going through difficult times, and my wife and I would spend sleepless nights trying to battle our problems. My wife suddenly decided to visit the Sai Baba's prayer hall in our locality. Soon, I accompanied her, and for the first time in several months, our family slept peacefully that night. My belief in Sathya Sai Baba was never based on any major changes or coincidences but on small things. I faced more and more problems, but this constant belief that Swami will back me kept me moving forward. One of the astonishing things that have happened and continue to happen is that every time I face a hurdle in life, this belief materializes into some sort of solution. I would understand if somebody told me that it was a coincidence. However, when you hold onto a person or power, nothing is ever a coincidence. Everything happens for a reason, and that reason for me is Swami." The above interview is a great argument made concerning the hypothesis. The interviewee recalls tough times as a gateway to his belief and how subsequent experiences strengthened his belief in the Godman. As the middle-income groups have historically struggled financially since independence, it has produced ripple effects in their social and personal spheres, religion being one of them. This socially constructed belief only strengthened when the middle class slowly gathered back their economic strength in society. The interviewee also refers to miracles (or solutions), which are underlying factors specific to the class.

The two interviews represent a general image and understanding of the social class members above the age of 35. A few patterns observed would include a family-oriented approach to their spirituality and belief and any prior struggles that resulted in their belief in the godman. Another discussion that the topic put forward was the difference between following the said godman and other gods and any distinctions drawn to the same. To this question, all the interviewees in a summarized statement said that they believe the godmen they worship are a reincarnation of traditional Hindu gods and do not strike any distinction when it comes to the same.

7.3. Higher Income Groups

Interviews and documentary data available of individuals from higher income groups show a different approach and reasoning to spirituality. One of the most commonly observed trends among

these groups of interviewees was escapism as defined by John L. Longeway in his paper, "The Rationality of Escapism and Self-Deception", as thoughts, actions or entertainment that "helps us avoid, temporarily, unpleasant truths that we must live with, and it is this escape from the unpleasant reality that gives us the term". One of the most common escapist patterns observed from the interviewees stems from the busy and detached lifestyle that strips them away from social values and, in some cases, away from their own family. It is to these roots that they want to retire voluntarily. It is also important to note that the said pattern was not observed in individuals below 35.

Aretha, aged 42, a former socialite hailing from California, had left the United States of America a few years ago to come and live closer to her Bhagwan at Prashanthi Nilayam.

When asked to give an insight into what prompted her for this change, she said,

"It is peaceful here. A sense of cohabitation that is non-judgmental and eases into nature, gifted with Bhagawan's presence and blessings. I am at a juncture where I move towards a more spiritual understanding of the world and not be held back by materialistic desires."

When asked how she accepted life in the ashram, she said,

"It is easier to simply eliminate any contemporary expectations and belief systems and stretch back to traditional roots of living. Escapism is a very common reason, and I do not intend to portray a sense of unhealthy detachment. This feeling you cultivate over the years might weaken your connection with the outside world. However, it strengthens your relationship with yourself, and that by far is more important."

SK, 40, a businessman hailing from UAE, adds to the above statement saying, "Every time I return to India, I come to stay at the ashram for a few days. Though I do have responsibilities being the sole breadwinner and paying for my kids' education, I look forward to the day I can peacefully retire from my business and live here. "

Based on documentary data available and taking into consideration the prices of certain programs as held at Nityanandam Ashram in Bengaluru, Prasiddha Yogini, a popular social media influencer who has recorded her spiritual journey, falls into an economic space that allowed her to move out of her home in the USA and follow her spiritual path in India. She accepted Hinduism as her religion about four years ago. She even spent two years living at the ashram in Bengaluru. She offered her services as the head yoga instructor. She was considered to be amongst the inner circle of devotees at the ashram. In a video uploaded on YouTube on the 25th of September 2019, she listed how she began her spiritual journey under Nityananda. Speaking about how she got introduced to Hinduism and Nityananda, she says,

"Almost five years ago, my brother came across Nityananda on YouTube. Back then, I had not explored Hinduism that deeply. I was still very much set in the Catholic culture I grew up in, thinking Jesus was the only way. My initial reaction was that Nityananda was a cult leader. I wanted to preface this initially because I did not come into this in love with Swamiji."

Later, she discovered how important it was to find a guru and how Nityananda helped her navigate and even taught her to protect herself from negative energies that hinder her spiritual practices and awakening. She claims relevance to the material propagated by the controversial guru. To a query on what made her stay in the ashram for two years before she returned, she says,

"No matter where we are in life, I believe that whoever we are around, their beliefs and ideas influence us. I have never found a more empowering space and community that brings everything back to the fundamental beliefs, those true, life-changing spiritual truths: the Nityananda Sanga. I do not want people around me who do not truly understand the same universal truths as I do."

The above statement shows the ideal trajectory of changing beliefs and understanding of reality and how influence constructs it individually. Though initially, she claims to have visited the ashram with skepticism, constant reinforcement of ideas and beliefs, she redefines her own beliefs and actions based on her social surroundings.

However, two interviewees, namely BA, aged 50, a homemaker, and AK, 52, a defense official, depicted a similar understanding of their belief as that of middle-income groups, which stand as an exception depicting a thin line between the two classes.

The above set of interviews reinforce and confirm the presence of differences among the socio-economic classes based on their social position and upbringing, which further reiterates the hypothesis.

8. Discussion of Results

The above study provides us with the following observations. There is a clear distinction in the needs and wants concerning the devotees depending on their socio-economic backgrounds. However, it is highly debatable whether this difference results from their subconscious conditioning towards their socio-economic groups.

Within the division of socio-economic backgrounds, there is also a slight variation in the responses based on the age groups of the interviewees. Those between 20-30 years were more open to discussing difficulties they face, including familiar pressure and establishing individual beliefs. They were less hesitant in answering questions regarding their gurus as compared to other age groups.

However, this trend was predominantly observed in middle-income groups rather than lower or higher income groups.

Another pattern observed across all socio-economic groups is their division between themselves and the "the others". This clear distinction encloses the individual in an echo chamber, reinforcing the ideology in a never-ending cycle coupled with establishing social circles dominated by devotees.

9. Limitations

This study is not devoid of certain shortcomings concerning the methodology and findings. Therefore, kindly note the following limitations: In the face of broader research areas, it is important to widen the interviewee's scope to put forward a comparatively more inclusive piece of research. It is also important to note that the godmen mentioned in the paper are not differentiated concerning their teachings and ideologies, which could stem into an independent study. The differences in these godmen and their respective business models might have a separate approach to the hypothesis.

10. Conclusion

This study provided further insight into the relationship between socio-economic position and the needs of devotees while serving a particular godman. It explores this relationship in length through extensive interviews. Also, it contributes to the understanding of constructivism as a theoretical format and its role in religious choices. The analysis of the interviews reinforces the hypothesis that there is indeed a difference in the needs of people following a particular godman and these needs are to an extent motivated by their socio-economic position. The study focuses on godmen rather than religion to identify responses and how an individual navigates through the myriad of opinions and controversies present.

In the wake of Guru and Godmen worship becoming a popular new form of urban Hinduism, even though the idea itself has been present since ancient Indian societal construct, this study draws relevance in contemporary terms. Meera Nanda, in her book, "The God Market: How globalization is making India more Hindu", says that this trend has resulted in the "newly prosperous middle classes turning away from the more philosophical, neo-Vedantic form of religiosity and embracing a more ritualistic and superstitious form of popular Hinduism cantered on temples, pilgrimages, and popular saints or god-men/women"

However, the vast reach of these gurus and godmen can no longer be simply considered as a part of Indian culture and its propagation. The growing visibility of India in the global economy has resulted in Hinduism getting fused with national pride and dreams of development, which has portrayed a globalized image of Hinduism, the one that has gained international attention and, as a result, has resulted in projecting the religion onto a wide audience of international origin. Conclusions made from the study have also opened up new questions for future research. Some of the areas that could be explored include how business models of ashrams are structured to cater to the different needs of their devotees and how much of these decisions keep their socio-economic background in their mind. Further psychological studies could involve studying the guru devotee dynamics and how social positions play a role in the same.

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