

We offer two reports on the murder of Indian rationalist/skeptic Narendra Dabholkar.

Indian Skeptic Assassinated, World's First Anti-Superstition Law Passed

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Narendra Dabholkar was a famous skeptic in Maharashtra, India, who spent thirty years crusading against superstition, faith healing, and Indian “godmen.” As one of the leaders of the anti-superstition movement, he received numerous death threats since becoming an active rationalist in 1983 and battling an industry against con-men, healers, astrologers, and godmen. It all came to an end in August 2013 when Dabholkar was assassinated as he went on a stroll near his home. Two suspects fired four times at close range and fled on a motorcycle. He died shortly after at a hospital. His death spawned massive protests, which forced the government to finally act on a law he long championed.

In 1989, Dabholkar cofounded and served as president of the Maharashtra Anhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti (MANS), which translates into English as the Maharashtra Blind Faith Eradication Committee. Previously, Dabholkar completed his training to become a medical doctor at the Government Medical College, Miraj, and became interested in stopping godmen from exploiting the sick and needy. The Committee’s stated goals include encouraging “scientific attitude, scepticism, humanism and critical thinking among the people” and opposing “harmful superstitions which exploit people.” Besides healers, fortunetellers, and tantrics, MANS fights to stop the nearly 500,000 to 600,000 animal sacrifices that occur throughout Maharashtra each year. There are 180 branches of the organization throughout the state that deal with region-specific superstitions. For instance, the central part practices Devadasi culture, where a girl is forced at birth to be turned over



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to a Hindu temple where she will not marry and her whole life is to be dedicated to that temple. Though it is illegal now, the practice still happens and is connected to human trafficking. In addition, in Vibharba mentally challenged people are re-cast as “holy” people, and groups organize around them to solicit money.

Under Dabholkar’s leadership, MANS took several approaches to challenge superstition. Reminiscent of James Randi’s million dollar challenge, MANS offers a twenty-one lakh prize (2.1 million rupees, about \$34,000) to anyone who can demonstrate a miracle, such as being able to levitate with the “power of yoga,” or stopping their heartbeat for a minimum of five minutes. The group also engages in de-

bates, confronts godmen who claim to have paranormal powers, conducts seminars for school children, and raises rationalist awareness during Hindu festivals. In 2011, Dabholkar helped get a court to rule that Ganesh idols “must be made by using clay and natural colours,” instead of with chemicals in the fluorescent paint that include toxic material like lead and mercury.

At the legislative level, the organization fought for eight years to get the state government to pass anti-superstition legislation, which includes prohibiting the sale of “magical remedies for curing rabies and snake bites” and stopping those who “beat mentally ill patients in the belief that they are possessed by evil spirits.” MANS described it as the world’s first anti-superstition law, but right-wing critics denounced Dabholkar and the law as being “anti-Hindu.” Supporters of the legislation have cited at least two cases of children being sacrificed, which the law prevents by banning “black magic.” Nonetheless, the bill has been pending in the state legislature for seven years after the cabinet approved it,

but it was not put to a vote.

Various political parties and social groups supported a *bandh*, or a strike/protest, in Pune, one of Maharashtra's major cities. According to journalist Tejas Mehta, Dabholkar's murder "led to a massive outpouring of grief and anger in Maharashtra," which in turn "prompted the state government to push an anti-superstition law that he had championed for years." The law has been debated for years, but only after his death was the law enacted. Yet it still awaits support from the parliament, which is required or the legislation will expire.

Dabholkar was part of a growing but tight-knit movement that faces challenges in India. Dabholkar's colleague, Sanal Edamaruku, a rationalist based in Delhi, fled India last year after investigating a "miracle" in a church and making comments that authorities claimed violated a law that forbids "deliberate and malicious acts, intended to outrage religious feelings or any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs." Edamaruku, now living in Finland, remembered Dabholkar as "one of the most wonderful soldiers of rationalism in Maharashtra because he was taking the movement down to the villages on one side and the legislature on the other."

Police are investigating the murder as a "planned killing," and the government is offering a ten-lakh reward (one

million rupees, about \$15,000) for information. There have been no arrests at this time, but police say it will happen "soon." There have been demands to turn the case over to India's federal police body, the CBI, from those blaming the local police for the lack of progress. The CBI has a very good reputation for not being corruptible.

In the meantime, Dabholkar's supporters are in mourning, vowing to keep his mission alive. Besides his activism as a rationalist, he served as editor of *Sadhana*, a weekly publication started by Pandurang Sadashiv Sane, a famous crusader for independence from Britain who fought against caste discrimination. Some of Dabholkar's articles are available on his organization's website at <http://antisuperstition.org>, and videos of his lectures are at <http://www.youtube.com/MaharashtraANiS>. ■

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The Sacrifice of a Skeptic BHASKAR SRIPADA

On August 20, 2013, a sixty-seven-year-old man was on a morning walk, near the Omkareshwar temple in Pune, in the state of Maharashtra, India. Two gunmen shot him with four bullets at point-blank range and reportedly fled on a motorcycle. The man was Dr. Narendra Dabholkar, a tireless, nonviolent rationalist and fighter against superstition and false prophets.

Dr. Dabholkar was trained as a phy-

sician and worked in the medical profession for ten years when, at the age of forty, he decided to devote his life to inculcating a scientific temperament and rational thinking in the common man. His main goals were eradicating superstitions such as belief in witches, uncovering black magicians who purveyed witchcraft, and debunking so-called miracles performed by the "godmen" of India. To these ends, in 1989 he cofounded the Committee for Erad-

ication of Blind Faith. In the years before his assassination, he had been actively campaigning for the passage of an ordinance to prevent "human sacrifice and black magic" in his Indian state.

A witch, according to common Indian superstition, is a woman with supernatural powers and evil intent. Even today, and all too often, when a misfortune befalls a community, alarmed villagers seek the guidance of a *tantrik*, or village witch doctor and black magic