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Mumbai Police crack down to unmask fake holymen
Jayashree Lengade (Reuters)
Mumbai , September 19

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 - [South](#)
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In tradition-bound India, if someone claims to be able to exorcise ghosts, levitate or pull a gold chain out of thin air, it does not take long for him to become known as a "godman".

While many godmen are not confidence tricksters, there are numerous so-called "Miracle Babas" who are just out to get rich by duping as many people as fast as they can.

But Mumbai Police are cracking down on the charlatans and have called for the help of a group known as the All India Committee to Eradicate Superstition and Blind Faith, to convince people special power is more often than not sleight of hand or illusion.

"The campaign is meant to be an eye-opener. We want to put a complete stop to those posing as godmen. They are involved in outright cheating and violent acts," joint commissioner of police for crime in Mumbai, SS Vagal, told Reuters.

Vagal said the campaign, which includes public meetings and television programmes, had begun to show results.

"Certainly, we have been able to make an impact. Several people have voluntarily made complaints and we have nabbed at least 25 of the fake godmen," he said.

Activists say the "Miracle Babas" come to India's commercial hub from poorer parts of the country seeking their fortune by exploiting people's insecurities.

"It's easy money -- without any investment. As long as fear exists among people such godmen will thrive," said Narendra Bhabolkar, founder of the 20-year-old committee that seeks to expose the tricksters.

HOLY SMOKE AND MIRRORS

A committee worker at a public gathering shows how a gold chain that looked as if it had been plucked out of the air had actually been tucked up a sleeve.

"It's simple. If you want people to bow down at you then you perform a trick," said well-known magician Anand Tayade, who is helping with the campaign against the fraud.

"There's no such thing as performing miracles on this earth."

"These godmen are unlike learned saints who renounce worldly life, give sermons and induce a feeling of positive energy. They are out to cheat gullible people to make money," Tayade said.

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Many godmen call themselves "Tantriks" -- those who follow the esoteric Hindu and Buddhist tradition of ritual and yoga.

In another demonstration, a man is clad in saffron robes and a false beard and seems to sit suspended in mid-air without any support but for a hand resting on a pole.

But a superstition-busting activist tells the hushed crowd of more than 100 people that the long garment actually hides a wooden seat fixed to the pole.

Godmen claim to be able to perform miracles and solve just about any problem under the sun -- from helping jilted lovers, or people with marriage and sexual problems, to those with job worries and sickness.

"It's the environment one grows up in that's usually responsible while others are looking for avenues to overcome stress in adversity," said Shyam Manav, another activist trying to educate people about superstition.

BLOOD SACRIFICE

The godmen charge anything from about 150 rupees up to millions of rupees, depending on a whole range of factors including what herbs and roots are provided as a potion.

And people seeking help from all walks of life can fall prey to the tricks.

But while most godmen restrict themselves to relatively harmless fraud, others get caught up in much more sinister affairs, including human sacrifice to appease "evil spirits".

In July, a nine-year-old boy was found dead on the outskirts of Mumbai. A man told police he killed the boy after a godman told him doing so would save his troubled marriage.

"We have intensified patrolling day and night to arrest fake godmen. Another human sacrifice cannot take place," said assistant police commissioner R.D. Jagtap.

While Mumbai police say the fake godmen are becoming more scarce in the city, the activists campaigning against superstition are travelling further out to towns and villages to spread their message.

"We understand that blind practices cannot be ended easily. It will take generations. But our effort will continue," said committee to eradicate blind faith member and Bollywood actor Shreeram Lagoo.



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