A U S T I N

Atheist

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India's Growing Skeptic Movement

—by Tracie Harris ©2008

Bangalore Skeptic is a free e-zine dedicated to skepticism—with particular focus on India. This new publication is in its first volume year and is produced in English. The magazine addresses the silly, strange and even dangerous sides of religion. Only 10 issues have been produced so far since its inception this year.

In the U.S., where skepticism most often only comes into conflict with Christian ideology, skeptics and freethinkers may be interested to see a copy of *Bangalore Skeptic* to gain an understanding of the sorts of religious ideologies their counterparts are responding to in other parts of the world.

The publication's editor/publisher, who goes by "Manoj," contributes to his own e-zine, but includes articles and contributions from many other sources as well. According to Manoj, the publication only goes out to "a few dozen rationalists and atheists in Bangalore as well as other parts of India." Manoj himself is "associated with Bangalore Rationalist Association, which was formed about one and a half years back. [They] generally meet twice in a month to discuss various topics and have about 60+ members in [the] association at present."

While skeptics in the West are used to the question, "Why do you criticize Christians so much more than other religions?," the October 2008 issue of *Bangalore Skeptic* contains an article by Manoj that explores, "Why I Criticize Hinduism the Most." His reasons, not surprisingly, mirror those of Western skeptics who focus on Christianity and include that (1) it is the most common religion in his area of the world, and (2) it is the religion most familiar to him personally.

The publication exposes and criticizes cruel and brutal acts perpetrated by religious adherents acting on their religious beliefs. Some stories detail children being killed in religious rituals and women raped or murdered for violations of religious traditions—such as seeking legal counsel to obtain a divorce, or being seen in public with unrelated men. Situations such as these are generally provided as the main reasons for skeptic activism and the promotion of rationalism in many areas of the world. Even within the U.S., cases are brought before the courts and the religious rights of parents are sometimes upheld over the rights of their children to receive immediate, life-saving medical care. Cases such as those of Kara Neumann of Weston, Wisconsin, Amy Hermanson of Sarasota, Florida, and Ian Lundman of Independence, Minnesota, make headlines far too often for, and are not overlooked by skeptics in the U.S.

Bangalore Skeptic also exposes tension and violence between different religious groups. October's issue, for example, includes an article that detailes 28 violent incidents, between August and September, against Christian churches in Karnataka that included damage to property as well as injuries to people.

Manoj is one person putting out a publication that represents only a small part of a much larger, and well organized skeptic movement in India. Manoj points out that how well the rational community is represented depends on where you are on the subcontinent. "The rationalists have a significant presence in a few states. In the state of Kerala, Kerala Yukthivadi Sangham (Kerala Rationalist Association), for instance, has thousands of members, with units in every village." Kerala also has a few other rationalist groups such as Indian Rationalist Association and Bharathiya Yukthivadi Sangham, with active units throughout the state. Additionally, Kerala has an interesting history with regard to religious skepticism that involves Sanal Edamaruku, founder-president of Rationalist International, and secretary general of the Indian Rationalist Association.

The Rationalist International Web site provides a transcript of a speech Edamaruku delivered at the Centenary Conference of Rationalist Press Association (London) at the West Hill College, Birmingham, UK on June 26, 1999. The event celebrated the 100-year anniversary of the organization, which was a founding member of the

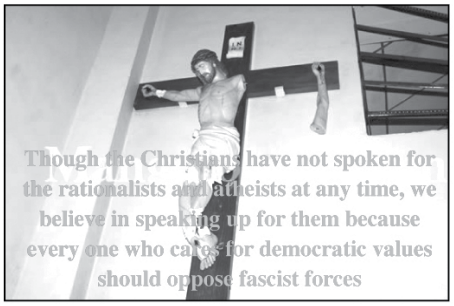
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…and then they came for the Christians!

Narendra Nayak



The Sangh Parivar had promised to use Karnataka as its laboratory in the south. The Gujarath experiment is being conducted in full vigour here. In the run up to the assembly elections, Muslims were the guinea pigs. Now, it is the return of the Christian community. In the month of September, 2008, churches were attacked all over Karnataka, but mainly in the district of Dakshina Kannada. A number of churches were attacked, icons damaged and some devotees were also assaulted. The Roman Catholic community protested against this by assembling in churches and 'peacefully' carrying out sit down strikes on the roads. These peaceful expressions of their outrage also included throwing stones at the policemen. The police reacted in a manner befitting the charges which are being hurled at them that they are the B team of the Hindutva camp. They came down brutally on the protesters beating them up mercilessly, hauling them to police stations and slapping very serious charges upon them like attempted murder etc. This happened on a Sunday and the next day was a bundh and all activity in the city of Mangalore came to a stand still. On the



The October issue of Bangalore Skeptic *features an article highlighting Hindu violence against Christian communities in one region of India. Along with photos of police dragging protestors and vandalism inside churches, the article includes this quote: "Though the Christians have not spoken for the rationalists and atheists at any time, we believe in speaking up for them because everyone who cares for democratic values should oppose fascist forces."*

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About ACA

ACA provides *opportunities for socializing and friendship, promotes atheistic viewpoints, encourages positive atheist culture, defends the First Amendment principle of state/church separation, opposes discrimination against atheists, provides outreach to atheists in the greater Austin area, and works with other organizations in pursuit of common goals.*

ACA produces *a live cable access TV show and Internet radio show, presents a monthly lecture series, maintains a library of Freethought books, protests in support of civil liberties, and participates in various community service activities.*

ACA operates *in an open and democratic manner to provide a community of like-minded people for social interaction and support.*

ACA is *a 501(c)(3) nonprofit educational corporation made up of volunteers. The membership is restricted to atheists, but does not discriminate on the basis of gender, race, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality, or disability.*

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Submission Deadlines

Issue	Deadline
Jan.	Dec. 1
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Aug.	July 1
Sept.	Aug. 1
Oct.	Sept. 1
Nov.	Oct. 1
Dec.	Nov. 1

India

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International Humanist and Ethical Union, which bills itself at its Web site as "the sole world umbrella organisation embracing Humanist, atheist, rationalist, secularist, skeptic…freethought and similar organisations world-wide."

Edamaruku's speech detailed the story of an interfaith marriage with a Christian husband and Hindu wife. The pair were abandoned and later mistreated by both their families. But their child, born outside in the rain, became the first "student in the history of Kerala, who joined school without any religion in his records."

The significance of that event, according to Edamaruku, was that "today, nearly 40 years later, the situation in Kerala has drastically changed. No such thing can happen any more. Kerala's rationalist movement has grown very strong and influential. One of its major tasks is to encourage and protect inter-caste and inter-religious marriages. A special wing was set up—Intermarriage Bureaus—to look after the legal and practical requirements of couples who decide to marry against the traditional rules. And today there are thousands of school children who refuse to have any religious entry in their records. Kerala has become a successful model of a society, which transformed from its rigid traditions."

The caste system in India is a complex and multi-tiered social structure that serves to promote endogamy and limit social advancement. This system has broken down in larger cities in India, but persists in rural areas.

At the end of his moving speech, Edamaruku revealed that he was that child born in the rain.

According to Manoj, "with a significant presence of Christians (and Muslims) in the state, inter-religious marriages between Hindus and Christians have been quite common and do not raise any eyebrows, except in fundamentalist circles."

While most Western atheists will recognize names like Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris and Dennett, India has it's own set of homegrown movers and shakers in addition to Edamaruku. In a region known as Tamil Nadu, a coastal region and one of the 28 states of India, a movement known as "Dravida Kazhagam" has arisen. The ideology is based on the philosophy of Indian atheist leader, Periyar EV Ramaswamy. The Dravidian Movement in India began in the early 1920s, and was also known, not surprisingly, as the "Self-Respect Movement." Its fundamental aim was to achieve equal human rights for members of all castes. The movement spread to other countries with significant Tamil populations, and was influential and, ultimately, successful.

Center for Inquiry founder, Paul Kurtz, professor emeritus of Philosophy at the State University of New York at Buffalo and a prominent name among Western skeptics, attended this group's September 2008 Annual Conference, and presented a Periyar Award to Tamil Nadu's Chief Minister M.Karunanidhi. The Dravida Kazhagam group also publishes a rationalist monthly in English, *The Modern Rationalist*.

But Tamil Nadu is just one area where the skeptic movement is growing. According to Manoj, "In the state of Punjab too, the rationalists have a well organized unit and have published a number of books in Punjabi, the local language. They also put out a rationalist monthly in Punjabi." Further, "another state where rationalists have a wide network is Maharashtra, where the activists of Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti (Superstition Eradication Committee) undertake tours regularly throughout the state exposing superstition and imparting scientific outlook. They put out *Vartapatra*, a popular monthly in Marathi, the local language. They also put out an English e-zine, *Thought & Action*.

Rationalists also have been organized since 1985 in West Bengal, an East Indian state, as the Science and Rationalists' Association of India. They have no expressed political agenda, and list their "aim" at their Web site as being "to eradicate superstition and blind faith, which includes religious fanaticism, astrology, [the] caste-system, spiritualism, and numerous other obscurantist beliefs." They list their "view" as being "that rational way of thinking shall be spread among the people as against spiritual or religious teachings, and that alone can bring about social change." The group's activities include holding regular classes, organizing seminars, and publishing literature to promote their mission. They also send teams to investigate "any so called supernatural phenomena," and publicly report on their findings.

The West Bengal group boasts that among their achievements they have successfully established Humanism as a religion for the first time in India and stripped astrologers of their status as "legitimate professionals."

Manoj adds that "in the state of Andhra Pradesh, the Atheist Centre founded by Gora, an atheist and a staunch follower of Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the nation, has been active for over seven decades. The Centre regularly hosts World Atheist Conference at Vijayawada, in Andhra Pradesh. The Seventh World Atheist Conference will be held on January 5–7, 2009."

On the national scene, the Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations (FIRA) has existed since 1997 as a link between more than 50 other rationalist, atheist, skeptic, secularist, and science organizations. Manoj adds that "B.Premanand, the founder-convener of FIRA, has been the most prominent face of rationalist movement in India for the last three decades. A septuagenarian, Premanand has been a scourge of Indian 'godmen' such as Puttaparthy Sathya Said Baba. The current president of FIRA, Narendra

Nayak, a Professor of Biochemistry, is the counterpart of James Randi and he travels extensively throughout India exposing superstitions and 'miracle' peddlers."

The Indian Skeptic Web site, the official Web site of the Indian Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (Indian CSICOP), lists FIRA's "minimum statement" as follows:

"Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance, which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethic based on human and other natural values in the spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities. It is not theistic, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality."

The Indian skeptic and rationalist movement is alive, well, and growing. Its members are observing the same problems in India that skeptics in other parts of the globe are also trying to address and resolve. The Indian skeptical community is striving to use education and reason to combat superstitious beliefs and supernatural claims that cause demonstrable harm to others by promoting violence and prejudice in communities that would be better served through unity and equity.

Bangalore Skeptic is not currently available online, but it can be delivered to you free via e-mail by requesting a subscription from Manoj at <bskeptic@gmail.com>.

Related Web Sites:

<www.themronline.com>
The Modern Rationalist Web site.

<www.tarksheel.com>
Tarksheel Society Website (includes English content), a rationalist organization that puts out a publication in Punjabi.

<http://humanists.net/avijit/prabir/sra.htm>
Web site for the Science and Rationalists' Association of India.

<http://www.indiansceptic.in/>
Official Website of the Indian Committee For Scientific Investigation Of Claims Of The Paranormal.

<www.antisuperstition.org>
Web site for the Committee for Eradication of Blind Faith (CEBF).

<www.nirmukta.com>
The purpose of Nirmukta is to discuss events and ideas that concern the secularization movement in India.

ACA CALENDAR

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 4
• **7-9 p.m.:** *CFI Austin Food for Thought Lecture (Old Quarry Branch Library, 7051 Village Center Dr.) Dr. Jennifer Whitson: "The Perception of Patterns in the Noise of Everyday Life"; Free.*

• **7 p.m.-?:** *Happy Hour (Dog & Duck Pub)*

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 7
• **12:15-1:30 p.m.:** *ACA Lecture Series (Austin History Center) Dr. James Dee: "The Truth about the Christmas Story"; Free.*

• **4:30-6 p.m.:** *The Atheist Experience (Channel 16)*

• **6:30 p.m.-?:** *Meet-up after The Atheist Experience (Threadgill's)*

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 11
• **7 p.m.-?:** *Happy Hour (Dog & Duck Pub)*

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 13
• **11 a.m.-12 p.m.:** *Adopt-a-street Clean Up (South Location: Old Alligator Grill, lot, 3003 S Lamar Blvd.)*

• **2-3:30 p.m.:** *Non-Prophets Internet Radio Show (See Web site for details)*

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 14
• **11:30 a.m.-1 p.m.:** *Regular Sunday Meeting (Romeo's)*

• **12:30-1:30 p.m.:** *ACA Board Meeting (Romeo's (on Patio))*

• **4:30-6 p.m.:** *The Atheist Experience (Channel 16)*

• **6:30 p.m.-?:** *Meet-up after The Atheist Experience (Threadgill's)*

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 18
• **7 p.m.-?:** *Happy Hour (Dog & Duck Pub)*

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 20
• **7-12 p.m.:** *Winter Solstice Party (Mike Swift's House)*

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 21
• **11:30 a.m.-1 p.m.:** *Regular Sunday Meeting (Romeo's)*

• **4:30-6 p.m.:** *The Atheist Experience (Channel 16)*

• **6:30 p.m.-?:** *Meet-up after The Atheist Experience (Threadgill's)*

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 25
• **7 p.m.-?:** *Happy Hour (Dog & Duck Pub)*

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 28
• **11:30 a.m.-1 p.m.:** *Regular Sunday Meeting (Romeo's)*

• **4:30-6 p.m.:** *The Atheist Experience (Channel 16)*

• **6:30 p.m.-?:** *Meet-up after The Atheist Experience (Threadgill's)*

REGULAR LOCATIONS:

- ***Austin History Center**, 9th and Guadalupe. Building opens at noon. Lectures are free and open to the public.*
- ***Dog & Duck Pub**, North of the Capitol, 406 W. 17th at Guadalupe, 512.479.0598. Informal gathering; food available.*
- ***Romeo's**, 1500 Barton Springs Rd. South of Town Lake.*
- ***Threadgill's**, 301 West Riverside Drive (at Barton Springs Rd.)*

Unless otherwise indicated, events are open to all atheist and atheist friendly people, regardless of ACA membership status. Check the calendar on the Web site <www.atheist-community.org/calendar> for last minute changes.

ACA Updates

- Shilling Cadena has been confirmed to the ACA board during the November 2 membership meeting. He fills a seat vacated by Sandara Jaramillo. Shilling serves as both the activism and activities chair.
- Don't miss Dr. James Dee's December 2 lecture on "The Truth about the Christmas Story: There are Two Stories; Neither One Happened; and Serious Scholars Know it."
- The ACA has adopted a second adopt-a-street cleanup location in South Austin. Clean-ups will alternate between the two locations with the South location being our December 13 target. Those who can participate can meet at the Old Alligator Grill parking lot,3003 S Lamar Blvd., at 11 a.m. Our adopted street is South Lamar between Barton Skyway and Panther Trail.
- Mike Swift will again host the ACA Winter Solstice Party on Saturday, December 20 from 7 p.m.–midnight. See the Web site for information concerning RSVPs and what to bring.
- The *Non-Prophets* will skip their December 27 show and resume airing on January 10.
- The *Atheist Experience* has started a new four-week rotation where cohosts Russell Glasser and Jen Peeples will play host and cohost every four weeks, giving Matt Dillahunty a regular break from hosting. He will play host on the remaining weeks with Martin Wagner, Tracie Harris, and Don Baker.