

“MIRACLE” AND “SCIENCE” IN THE GROWTH OF ANUKULCHANDRA FAITH

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Abstract

In Indian context, religious gurus and their organizations have, since centuries, played an important role in making, interpreting and spreading religious meanings and values. Frequently they are seen as the upholders of ‘tradition’, perceived as embodiment of divine and mediators of traditions. This research paper focuses on the roles played both by ‘science’ and ‘miracle’ in the expansion and sustenance of the guru-based organization of Thakur Anukulchandra. This paper explores how the devotees articulate and make sense of spiritual appeals to science in many different ways. Even though passionate pleas have been made by many of the devotees and the guru himself, about the importance of science, the role of ‘miracles’ is undoubtedly present and this concept is also invoked in a variety of ways to bring the devotees closer and also used as a strategy to recruit new members.

Keywords: guru, devotion, science, miracle

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1. Introduction:

In the present time, the importance accorded to science has become prevalent in the many guru movements that target the urban middle class, and that these movements invoke science in many different ways. References are made to scientific studies, experiments, etc. which serve to attract outsiders or potential members. According to Heelas (1996), in the mid-1990s, the notion of New Age gained momentum in India, particularly among the urban middle class. As in the West, the phrase 'New Age' typically pertains to activities such as meditation, belief in rebirth, enhancement of energy flow in the body through various techniques etc. This paper explores the ways, both scientific and miraculous, help in strengthening the spiritual organization of Thakur Anukulchandra (1888-1969) is worshipped by his devotees who believe he is an embodiment of science as well has magical powers.

Thakur Anukulchandra a physician, a guru and the founder of Satsang Ashram, was born AnukulchandraChakravarty in Himaitpur to SivachandraChakravarty and Monmohini Devi village of Pabna district of British India which is now a part of Bangladesh. Anukuchandra as a young medical student in Calcutta, first came across the needs of slum dwellers in 1911, when medical needs in India were many and facilities and doctors were practically nonexistent (Hauserman, 182). At this point in time, a young Anukul came back to Himaitpur after six years of study and began to practice medicine.

In 1913, Anukulchandra was given initiation by his mother. After his initiation, his activities in *kirtan* became more intensified and continued for nights together. During *kirtan*, he often went into trance, fell on the ground and uttered messages in that condition (Hauserman, pp.128-129). His going into trance during *kirtan*, delivering holy messages during trance and the devotion of those around him attracted many more people and gradually his village home was converted into a popular ashram as a number of people came to his village to visit him began to settle permanently.

The registration of the Satsang was originally done in Pabna in 1925 as a public charitable institution. After partition, in it was registered in the Indian Union in 1951. Thakur Anukulchandra left Pabna and came to Deoghar on 2nd September 1946. Twenty years after the

emergence of the Satsang, it had a population of eight thousand residents. At present there are more than two thousand branches of his Satsang located not only in India but also Bangladesh, Burma, Europe and America. SatsangVihars have been set up in several different parts of India including Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Tripura, West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, etc. This article is based on my research carried out mostly in Thakur's SatsangVihar in Bhubaneswar

2. Methodology and Research Area:

The proposed study has used the qualitative approach. It was conducted with the help of both primary and secondary data. For the collection of primary data, methods of participant observation, informal interview and snowball sampling were used. The respondents included devotees and the *satsangvihar* administrators. The units of analysis were the individuals, the group (organization) and social artifacts (books, newsletters, magazines). Apart from that, field visits were done to participate in religious and cultural events and lectures of the organization. Analyses of religious and other publicity material were done in order to explore the issues of guru devotion, science and miracle.

The SatsangVihar in Bhubaneswar is located along the National Highway 5 (Kolkata-Chennai). It lies adjacent to the Income tax colony. The SatsangMandir is 4 kilometers away from the Railway Station and 10 kilometers away from airport. It is 0.2 km away from the Kolkata-Chennai Highway. The all white huge temple attracts attention of all who pass by that stretch. In the recent years many temples have been built by the devotees of the Thakur across Odisha but the biggest is in Bhubaneswar which is the state capital where the majority of the population is drawn from rural areas of the state. This is a very significant point as these people are deeply rooted in religion and rural culture and continue to observe traditional rites, rituals and festivities despite being part of the urban milieu and maintain close ties with their respective villages.

In case of Thakur Anukulchandra's organization, the quest of scientific legitimacy in the spiritual movement has often been intermeshed with the claims of miracle. The devotees express spiritual appeals to science as well as miracles in different ways and in different contexts, each of which

needs analysis. In India, the importance of scientific authority and legitimacy has been gaining popularity since the late nineteenth century. It was during this period that the Hindu revivalists began to read Hinduism as an ancient science. According to them, the Vedas were scientific, and the scientific progress made during the ancient time had been forgotten in the present era of disorder and chaos (Nandy, 1995; Nanda 2003). For example, the Transcendental Meditation founded by Maharshi Mahesh Yogi emphasized on how the meditation techniques and the Vedic principles that underline it fit together with modern science. Even though he considered his techniques scientific, he explained that the faith that was obtained through personal experiences was of greater consequence than science.

3. Analysis and Findings:

The findings of the study are presented below.

3.1. Scientificity of Spirituality

During the course of my fieldwork in Thakur Anukulchandra's Satsang Vihar in Bhubaneswar, I was shown a book volume by a devotee, Mr. Jena. The book was in English and had various articles about the guru, his principles, the practical and scientific basis of his teachings, etc. In an article, Prof. Bhattacharya writes '...Thakur's deep insight into the nature of the universe and its constituents was not limited to the vibration energy alone. He could see into the inner or ultimate constitution of matter. According to him "The positive in an atom loves the negative...and the aura of electrons dances around the positive, shooting and throbbing with the effulgence of quanta resonating transmission...', observations which immediately bring into mind the theories of Rutherford, Bohr and Max Planck."

Mr. Jena went on to describe the various practices of the group like *kirtan*, *bhajan* and meditation. He emphasized the peace of mind he obtained through the breathing and meditation techniques that was prescribed by Thakur Anukulchandra. Notably all these articles were written by people who had doctorates. This was brought to my attention by the devotee and he quipped, 'Have a look at the writers' column. All of them are doctors [doctorates], they have done their PhDs. These are people of eminence. Do you think they would have followed Thakur if there was no logical, rational basis to his teachings?'

Here, the use of doctoral titles brings into play a scientific authority. Examination of the spiritual books of this organization shows that doctoral titles frequently crop up in it. These doctoral titles enhance the *ethos*, a term used by Aristotle to refer to an appeal made to the ethics, intellect and social standing of the speaker, who is often seen as a repository for such traits. According to Pierre Bourdieu (1984), doctoral titles represent ‘educational capital’ which is a kind of cultural capital, generated by official documentation of a certain level of knowledge and reasoning. This is an important point of examination as higher academic titles added to the names of people makes other people with less educational qualification hard to question them or take a different position from them.

It was interesting to note that an appeal to science and logic was directed mostly at newly recruited members and outsiders who were considered as potential members. Priyanka, a nineteen-year-old college student told me that she was encouraged by her tuition teacher to become a member of the *satsang* as the special mantra given during initiation would enrich and sharpen her mind which would in turn have a positive impact on her studies. When asked if she felt any changes after joining the faith she replied that it had only been a few months since she joined the *satsang* but she was already feeling ‘peaceful’ and could concentrate better in her studies. She had also told some of her friends about this and was sure that some of them would join too. ‘Adopting the practices shown by the Thakur will reduce stress, improve our quality of life and help us grow. It is a scientific fact. It has been proved by science that meditation actually helps the mind’, she said.

During another interaction with a devotee, Mr. Patnaik, while trying to make me understand about the advantages of ‘proper meditation’, he said ‘The continuous repetition of a particular word acts upon our central nervous system and increases the elasticity of the brain cell. The impulse of whatever we do or want to do goes as a message to the brain where it is considered. After this consideration, our muscles and nerves are instructed accordingly. The more sensitivity and power of reception of the brain cells are developed, the more evolved we become. But this chanting of *mantra* should be done properly according to the instructions and guidance of a guru.’ This is supposed enhance the ‘quality of life’ according to him.

These ‘scientific principles’ are also extended to what is considered an ideal vegetarian diet. Mr. Patnaik explained ‘Thakur Anukulchandra has considered the matter of good health and sound mind from the scientific point of view. He has stressed the importance of the type of food which not only satisfies the hunger but is easily absorbed in the system, giving nourishment and vitality, which contributes to the harmony and rhythm of the life process. The superiority of vegetarian food over non vegetarian in maintaining the balance in the body’s biochemical processes has been emphasized by him’. Even though vegetarianism is not a strictly followed rule, it is considered ideal and according to Mr. Patnaik ‘the more spiritually advanced devotees follow a vegetarian diet.’

Several features of Mr. Patnaik’s explanation stood out. One was the ways in which he combined religious expressions with medical ones. Second was his treatment of the concept of ‘energy sources’ as something measurable and comparable and also the borrowing of terminologies from modern science which were applied while explaining the scientific value behind each practice. These spiritual teachings gave a profound impression of being scientific. It has been noted that attempts to give a scientific spin to religion is common to societies where science has replaced religion as the major area for truth-seeking (Rothstein, 2004). The introduction of modern science to India in the nineteenth century has led to its role as an instrument of the empire and a symbol of progress and universal reason (Gosling 2007).

According to Anukulchandra, science and religion (*dharma*) are not opposed to each other. Anything which upholds human existence is dharma. It is the duty of dharma to overcome ignorance but whatever progress we may make in the field of science. In Satyanusaran (1950 [1918]), he says “‘Beyond’ will remain forever so also the agony for that. If man wants to eradicate the sufferings, through the means of scientific instruments, then why should not he make use of his own physical body, so full of vitality, the best and finest of all instruments which are at his own disposal as the blessings of the Almighty? No scientific investigation can be said to be perfect, which does not take account the culture of keeping the human bio-psychic system healthy, sensitive and tolerable. From this perspective you may as well say Dharma is Science”.

Echoing the same sentiments, a twenty-six-year-old doctor and a devotee of Thakur explains:

Success will become inevitable if we work in the right direction after thinking and considering pros and cons of everything that we do. Science is science, it is logical. If things are properly implemented, then right kind of result is bound to follow. If anything appears in my intuition, then and there, I want to carry out the same and arrive at the conclusion. Because, of what use is it to me if the knowledge, experience and power of judgment is not expanded? I think that one should learn to carry out scientific examination impeccably. This kind of principle should be encouraged. Then, there will be no more ignorance. People can live well. One's intuition also will also grow if one treads on the path of spiritual culture and scientific investigations simultaneously. Even at that stage one has to keep watch so that the scientific approach and interpretation is not hindered in any way. Otherwise it will not be possible to make any dent into a superstitious way of life¹.

3.2. Miracle as a bond between guru and devotee

Although for the devotees, the guru is most commonly considered as a symbol of love, his power is enhanced in manifold ways through miracles. Even though these miracles are mostly witnessed by persons individually, rather than communally, they perform an important function of strengthening the bond between the guru and the devotees. They include such accounts as physical healing, incidents special knowledge of future events, capability to project themselves into the experiences of devotees, etc.

In contemporary India, even though various gurus have their own personal styles and advocate certain spiritual teachings, they share certain aspects which can be considered a regular feature of guru based devotion. Firstly, gurus are considered to be individuals who are more endowed spiritually. For the devotees, their guru is the repository of special powers and these powers can permeate to them if they are 'properly devoted' and this in turn can lead to contentment and well being. The devotees get attracted to a guru faith because they are convinced of the ability of the guru to perform miracles. For example, in the case of Sathya Sai Baba, his divinity is marked and manifested through the demonstration of miracles such as holy ash, gold chains and rings, etc during his public appearances among his devotees (Srinivas, 2010). Similar is the case of Mata

¹ Interview with a devotee on 15th April, 2014

Amritanandamayi, a popular female guru, who has a characteristic personal manner of interacting with her devotees. She embraces each of her devotees individually and is believed to work miracles in the lives of devotees in a subtle and steady manner by changing their personalities and producing changes in their material circumstances. She is renowned for her ability to alleviate the misery and pain of her devotees (Warrier, 2003).

In case of Thakur Anukulchandra, experiences of miracles are often critical to the cementing of the guru-devotee bond. For example, according to a female devotee, aged 49 who has been working for the ashram since 20 years:

Thakurji is not only a guru for me; he is an incarnation of god. During the birth of my third daughter, I developed some medical complications and was very critical...almost on my death bed. I recovered only through the grace of Thakurji. After this incident, I have made the SatsangVihar my home. Even my husband left his job to be with me here. Now I serve the Thakur every moment.

Another devotee, who has been initiated since the last 15 years, reported

I was very depressed as my daughter was estranged from me. My neighbor, who is a devotee of Thakur ji, asked me to join his family in prayer. While I was doing *kirtan*, I saw the guru blessing my daughter. When I came back home, my daughter had returned. I have been a disciple ever since.

At times, the devotees try to let go of their sense of being in charge of a situation or their lives and instead opt for a different outlook wherein the guru is regarded as the 'sole manager' of their lives, as a devotee put it 'I don't consider life's problems as mine anymore because I know Thakur will solve these issues'. For a lot of devotees, this type of surrender is based on prospect of material reward and also in other cases, non-material rewards such as 'peace of mind', 'contentment'. For the devotees, being attached to Thakur and surrendering to his godly agency consists of taking a leap of faith and is bound up with the hope that their guru will work miracles in their lives and will alleviate their personal sufferings, prevent crises and will lead to a good life in general. As a devotee explained, 'Certain things are bound to happen. It is destined. But

when we have faith in Thakur those difficulties will be easily overcome. For example, if you are destined to have a brick thrown at you, devotion to Thakur will convert that brick into a stone'. In other cases, loyalty towards the guru is associated with the prospect of rewards which is more spiritual nature. These persons anticipate that by seeking out the guru's directions and by following his spiritual prescriptions, they might 'evolve' spiritually. For example, Basanti Swain, a 47-year-old businesswoman explains 'Belief in gurus has been present in India since ancient times. It is the only way through one can know the right path and this will help in all round development, physical, mental and spiritual.'

Even while going through their daily lives, the devotees are perpetually on the watch for such occurrences that can be interpreted as a 'miracle' and an expression of the guru's affection. This becomes evident when they talk about some of these 'miracle experiences' such as getting out unscratched out of accidents, getting help from strangers, improvement in medical conditions, etc. These are the ways in which some of the devotees engage actively in the construction of miracles so as to create spaces to establish the guru's divine grace and intervention. This shows that the devotees are generally more eager to point out the 'miraculous' or 'divine' aspect of such accounts rather than to chance or luck. Every unexpected incident that they encounter in their lives gets interpreted as a miracle worked by Thakur and a sign of his grace. These incidents of miracles experienced by the devotees become a symbol of the guru's love as well as the expression of their total, unwavering faith in him even though the responsibility of the experience miracles rests, to a large extent, on each individual devotee.

4. Conclusion:

Thakur Anukulchandra can be understood in terms of what Weber called 'prophet', i.e. an individual bearer of charisma. The prophet exercises his powers by virtue of his personal gifts and claims distinct revelations and has specific doctrines at the core of his mission. According to Weber, prophets very often practice divination as well as magical healing and counseling. Thakur Anukulchandra's profession as a doctor, his speaking in tongues in a state of trance as well as his advice and guidance to his followers helped him secure a position as a religious leader. As Weber says, 'the prophet may be an exemplary man who, by his personal example, demonstrates to others the way to religious salvation' (pp.55, 1965 [1922]).

From the above analyses, it can be said that like other forms of modern religion, the tradition of Thakur Anukulchandra, mediates between science and spirituality, personal affirmation and self-transformation, individualism and social commitment, and it does so in a form of religion that itself mediates between an orientation to the future and reliance upon a particular past. First, scientific rhetoric has become enormously widespread in Indian guru movements and certain activities targeted at the urban middle class, and it comes in numerous forms. Spiritual claims to scientific legitimacy are aimed chiefly for public outreach. During my study I found out that scientific rhetoric was restricted largely to contexts in which a guru or instructor aimed to attract new followers or impart spiritual knowledge to beginners. The modern notion of therapeutic personal power is also an ancient one and the Anukulchandra faith has, in appropriating the *sant* tradition, revived the notion that one should have an authoritative personal guide who can direct a person through his/her life by providing hope by the means of miracles and sustain this faith by fitting together religious principles with science.

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