

Rising popularity of Religious Leaders in India: A Sociological Study

Anjali Anand

Abstract

India is said to have one of the most diversified nations in terms of culture, traditions, people and lot more to say but the religious diversity we possess is the most fascinating one. It is wonderful to observe the pall of spirituality over the country. Each religion has its own set of beliefs, values and norms to lead life guided by the holy books. Religion has attributed to the behavioural norms of the Indian society in a tremendous way since the times immemorial and even today it has got a lot to do with the society. The perspectives about religion are numerous and it is undoubtedly surrounded by a lot of controversies which in turn result into many social problems for instance communalism. The leading reason for India's partition was religion. But it would be unjust to blame religion for all that happens wrong in the name of religion as the religion breathes and exists because of our interpretations and perceptions about it. India is known for its spirituality and it governs not only the social system but also the political system of our country.

The religious faith dominates our mindsets and decisive-power. It offers answer to our questions and is considered as our true guide but our faith has taken on new colours just like India underwent a grand makeover when it stepped into the 21st century. Until now we'd been considering God as the supreme power, be it unseen or unheard and human beings by no means could attain that "power". On one side, where India is on the road to development with scientific temperament and rationality, on the other side we are letting our faith played, the definitions of spirituality are changing, and man after attaining huge success in all his ventures is now on the path to become "God" or they are better known as spiritual leaders. It is being said that our body is the temple of living God but does that make us God? In recent times, we can witness new trends in our spiritual approaches. The recent case of Nirmal Baba has put forth many questions about the modern perceptions of Indians about spirituality. The educated and modern Indians are getting indulged in babas and their tantrums believing that they will seek solutions to their problems, making such people their mentors and placing a lot of trust in them and showing their devotion by making extravagant offerings. India has been home to saints and philosophers but such people have known to enlighten the masses through their knowledge about life merely sitting under a tree, but now such pain-healing and enlightenment sessions are being held in a/c rooms! Such people are being worshipped and are given the place of God, greeted with garlands and are revered. It is true that one's faith is one's own and the Indian Constitution offers religious liberty to all its citizens but there are some unscrupulous beings taking the advantage of the

fact and establishing them as “God men” who are distributing their knowledge in chunks claiming all of that to be the ultimate sources of truth. The religious ceremonies have become fancier with people having more and more money, all of this is affecting the modern Indian society in a lot of ways. The presence of religion and spirituality are indispensable to any society so it becomes necessary to study its trends with the changing time and the impact it makes. The research paper aims to find the sociological reasons for the growth of God men and how such a trend is influencing Indian society.

Keywords: Religion, spirituality, Godmen and Indian society.

Introduction

Religion all around the world occupies a very dominant position in social, political and cultural lives of the people. It is something in which human beings have deepest of their interests. In the words of MacIver and Page, “Religion as we understand the term, implies a relationship not merely between man and man but also between man and some higher power.” To people God is omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent. People willingly and joyfully subordinate themselves to the unseen power. The respect is accorded in the form of prayers, hymns or by making offerings. God’s worship is something which according should not be neglected as that could bring disaster. Religion specifies some dos and don’ts which are the acts of righteousness or sinfulness respectively and are followed by people seriously. The end of the human life is considered as the will of God as the cycle of life and death goes on and the person who dies achieves salvation which is the ultimate human goal. . However, people see religion through the eyes of pundit, gurus, clerics, mullahs and other religious leaders. The history is evident of the fact that religion has been used as a medium to establish and hegemony by many rulers and invaders. Religion survives because humans keep it alive by their beliefs. Not that the leadership in religion is indispensable but it matters to a large extent for the people. The religious leadership promotes goodness but at the same time, it can also put one’s faith in question. It is true that one’s faith is one’s own and the Indian Constitution offers religious liberty to all its citizens but there are some unscrupulous beings taking the advantage of the fact and establishing them as “ God men” who are distributing their knowledge in chunks claiming all of that to be the ultimate sources of truth. The religious ceremonies have become fancier with people having more and more money, all of this is affecting the modern Indian society in a lot of ways. The presence of religion and spirituality are indispensable to any society so it becomes necessary to study its trends with the changing time and the impact it makes.

- Aron (1967) discusses Weber outlook on charisma is the quality with the help of which a man dominates if he possesses exceptional qualities.
- Miyahara(1983)says “A charismatic leader can then be someone who is quite ordinary. What is crucial is the process by which such a leader is set apart from ordinary people and treated as if endowed with supernatural,

superhuman, or at least exceptional powers and qualities that are not accessible to the ordinary person.”

- Argentinian TV (2000) Sai Baba: A Sinning God? A TV Programme sent in 2000, presented by A. Agnostelli. A header was: “This is one of the most venerated and controversial men on the planet”.
- St Albert Gazette (Canada) (2004) Sai Baba was also mired in controversies, with several news reports about allegations of sexual abuse and fake miracles. A 2004, a BBC television program called the “Secret Swami” featured interviews with at least two American male devotees who claimed the guru had fondled their genitals and exposed himself to them while claiming it was part of a healing ritual.
- Singh (2004) observes that religion plays a vital role in the lives of Indians. But the claim that Indians are more spiritual than any other people in the world is simply baseless. People in India talk more about money and materialism. But the practice of rituals is deeply rooted in Indian societies than other societies. Religious considerations overpower economic ones. A Hindu having faith in ahimsa, even in the terrible situation of famine would die rather than kill an animal to feed himself.
- Conway(2008)in his study ‘Severe Problems with Bhagvan Kalki’s Deeksha Movement’ reveals that the so called ‘Kalki Deeksha Movement’ which since 2002 is called the Oneness Movement is a big scam by Amman and Bhagwan. Kalki is prophesised as avatar or Vishnu incarnate. As per one of the updates he charges huge amount of money for ‘deeksha Courses’ that are given by Deeksha practitioners. Nielsen deeply regrets for having worked as his chief missionary to the west as Kalki presents himself as the first full incarnation of God in 20,000 years and he says that indifference on the part of human beings towards him will lead their lives to hell.
- Ritzer (2011) in his book ‘Sociological theory’ discusses about the charismatic authority. Charisma has come up as a concept. Weber didn’t deny that the charismatic leader may have outstanding characteristics, but charisma depends on the group of disciples on has and the way the leader is defined by them .Even if the leader doesn’t possess anything his definition given by those who follow him establishes his position.
- Singh (2012) in her article “Blind faith: bizarre babas and their followers” talks about Aniruddha Bapu of Head of Shree Aniruddha Upasana Foundation claimed to incarnate of Shirdi Sai Baba who became popular by giving sermons in Mumbai and other cities of Mumbai advocating the path of Bhakti. His weekly sermons have been known to attract over 5000 devotees explain mantras and asks people to chant mantras.

Objectives

1. To identify the reasons for the popularity of religious leaders.
2. To analyse the differential impact of religious leaders on gender and class.

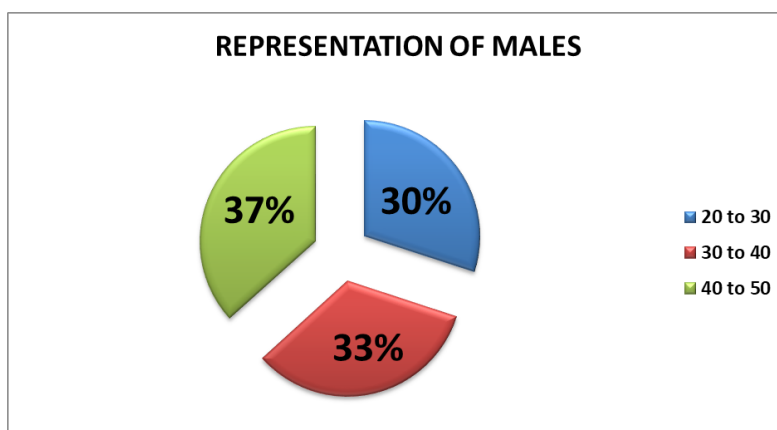
Methodology

The data has been collected from the sample collected using questionnaires, interview schedule and observation (both participant and non-participant). The methods were apt for obtaining culturally specific information about the values, opinions, behaviours, and social contexts of particular populations. Convenient sampling method was used for the research.

Findings

Table 1 : Representation of Males

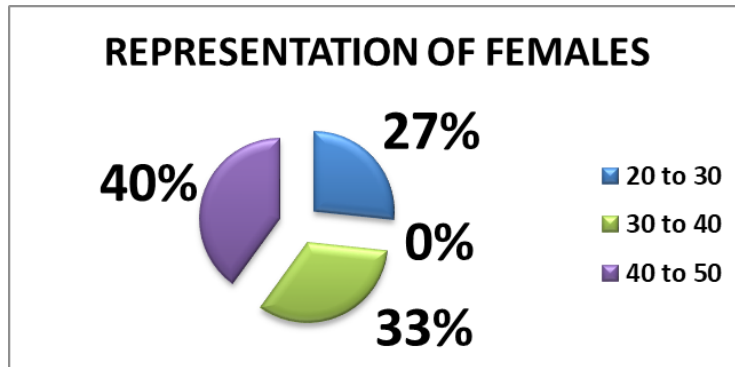
S.No.	Age Group	No. of Males	Percentage
1.	20 to 30	9	30%
2.	30 to 40	10	33.33%
3.	40 to 50	11	36.66%
Total		30	100%



Among males, the age group of 40 to 50 represents the category from which we have the maximum number of believers. It shows that people who are in the middle age group are more into worshipping religious leaders but the second category precedes the leading category by just four percent. The youngest group from 20 to 30 is showing the category of least followers. It is may be because of the reason that the males are more caught up at this age with their career and other masculine interests as compared to anything else and want to be carefree at this point of time and take out less time for religious activities. This age group is comparatively satisfied with their social life and has got security from all sides where as in the later stages of life men have to assume more and more responsibilities which lead them into a lot of stress. The same reason probably shows increase in the number of followers in 30 to 40 which is the age when people start assuming responsibilities of marriage and working hard to make career life better.

Table 2 : Representation of Females

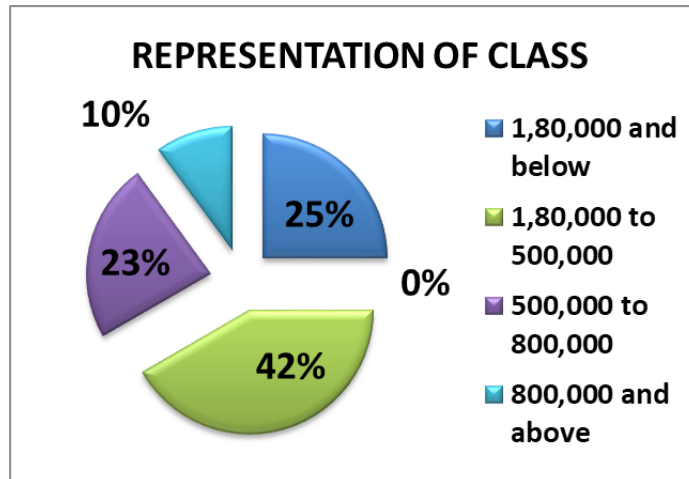
S.No.	Age Group	No. of females	Percentage
1.	20 to 30	8	26.66%
2.	30 to 40	10	33.33%
3.	40 to 50	12	40%
Total		30	100



The representation of females in the category of 40 to 50 age group is the highest followed by those who fall in the age group of 30-40 which is opposite to the representation in males. The women falling in the age group of 20-30 are found to be least involved in following religious babas which could again indicate that this particular age group of women resemble their male counterparts. The chart can be further analysed in respect of women who are in the age group of 40-50 concluding that this point that women tend to get more inclined towards religious activities because of family tensions and various other problems which women find inexpressible.

Table 3 : Representation of Class

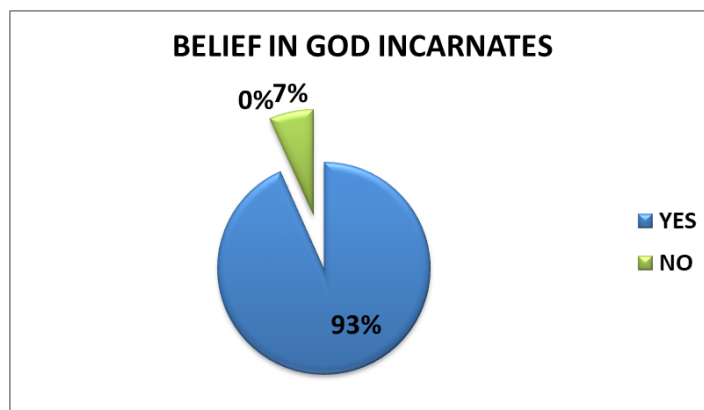
S.no.	Income Group	No. of respondents	Percentage
1.	1,80,000 and below	15	25%
2.	1,80,000 to 500,000	25	41.66%
3.	500,000 to 800,000	14	23.33%
4.	800,000 and above	6	10%
Total		60	100%



The middle class seems to form the largest portion of believers with 42% if we pay a look at the chart. The lower class shows comparatively less inclination towards the religious leadership with 25%. The upper middle class shows lesser percentage than the lower class and the least followers are in the higher class community. The middle class has in any case boomed up like anything and it is also the class which is most open to accepting and adapting to the changing trends and it is also the class which has these days got maximum aspirations.

Table 4 : Belief in God incarnates

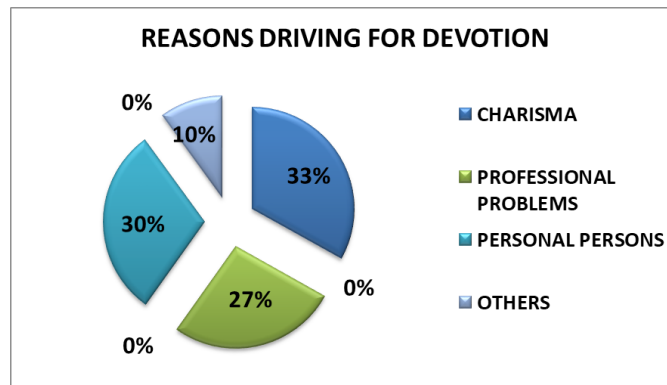
Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage
YES	56	93.33%
NO	4	6.66%
TOTAL	60	100%



It can be noted that 93% people believe that there could be God incarnates even in this age. This could be one major reason as to why the people get drawn towards babas for the claim form their side is that they are incarnates of some or the other God. There are only 7% of respondents who have no such belief. A strong faith in incarnates can be traced to various religious texts and this often prepares ground for religious leaders to make followers. The devotees are strongly driven towards their leader and have agreed that they truly believe their leaders to be the redeemers.

Table 5 : Reasons Driving for Devotion

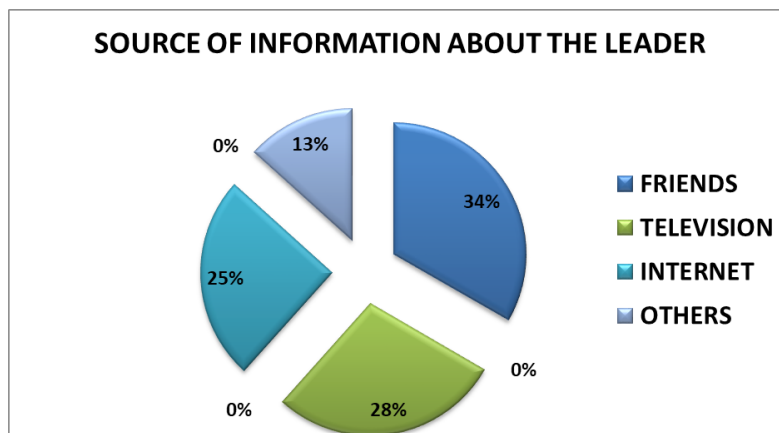
Charisma	30%
Professional problems	26.66%
Personal persons	33.33%
Others	10%
Total	100%



The reason which drives most of the people towards babaism has been found to be charisma. About 33% of the respondents are in favour of the fact that they find something uncommon about their leader, something magical which drives them. About 30% of the respondents were dealing with personal problems in their life and hence decided to become a part of the leader's community. Since the times have changes and life has become competitive people are ignoring their personal life which is leading them into a lot of problems in their personal like broken relationships and family discords etc. Hence a faith like this helps them to forget the problems and find solutions. The professional problems account for 27%, people when don't get jobs as per their need they feel low and become hopeless and hence seek solutions from a medium like this. There are 10% people who had special reasons to become a devotee of the leader.

Table 6 : Source of Information about the Leader

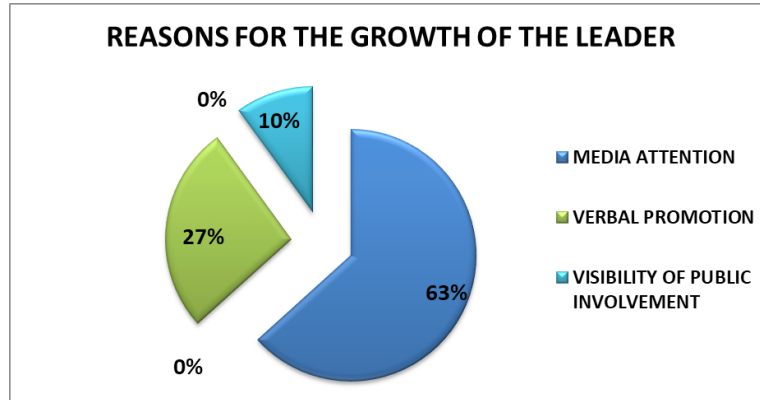
Friends	33.33%
Television	28.33%
Internet	25%
Others	13.33%
Total	100%



The maximum people who joined a particular baba's community got to know of him through their friends. There are respondents 34% of who said that they moved towards devotion for their friends had great experiences and hence they were expecting the same miracles to happen in their life. For television 28% of respondents agreed as these days there are various channels which showcase programmes about various religious leaders and their preaching. People are watching such shows in a good number. The Internet contributes 25%, it is less popular among the group that is getting indulged in following babas. May be verbal accounts are more effective for people. There could be other sources like banners or pamphlets, newspapers etc. as source of information.

Table 7 : Reasons for the Growth the Leader

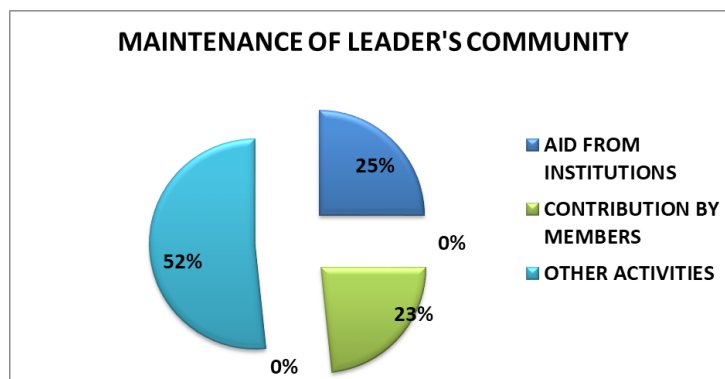
Media Attention	63.33%
Verbal Promotion	26.66%
Visibility of Public Involvement	10%
Total	100%



Out of total respondents, 63% percent accord the reason for leader’s wide spread popularity to the media which consistently covers about such leaders and keep the public informed about the leader’s actions. It is through the media that the experiences of the believers all around the world are shared and hence there is huge following. There are 27% who say yes to verbal promotion as many people would want to listen to the real experiences and that offers them a kind of authenticity. Around 10% people get drawn by the visibility of the leader in the social sphere wherein the leader is able to reach the public in the sense that there are camps being held, various sorts of gatherings are of which public are a part.

Table 8 : Maintenance of Leader’s Community

Aids from institutions	25%
Contribution by members	23.33%
Other activities	51.66%
Total	100%



The community according to 25% respondents is maintained through aid from the institutions which aim at social welfare and follow the principles of the leaders and have faith in her/him. According to 23% respondents, members contribute in some or the other way out of reverence and help in the maintenance of the community. Though respondents have also said the leader as such doesn't wish to accept anything from the believers but followers simply show their reverence for the leaders and understand the need to provide backing to the community. As per many respondents a very nominal figure is charged and that amount goes for social welfare. Around 52% of respondents have agreed to the fact that the community is maintained through other activities of the leader which include various institutions maintained by the leader, like most of the leaders market their daily use products, medicines, run schools and ashrams etc. Some respondents have also revealed that at the centres if devotees are to stay, they are charged an amount which was found to be really higher for an ordinary person to afford.

Table 9 : Belief in Leader's Misrepresentation

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Yes	0	0%
No	57	95%
Doubtful	3	5%
Total	60	100%



As far as projection of negative side of leaders is considered, 95% of the people have disagreed to the fact they any time believe the controversies related to their leader. In their opinion, the media simply looks for news that could get cheap publicity. Among the respondents 5% have admitted that they often find themselves in the state of confusion when it comes to believing the media facts when the leader is subjected to scrutiny. It is this very media which fosters the faith of the people about the leader by promoting about the leader. But the chart reveals, that the faith of the followers strictly stand by their leader. The leader enjoys affection and trust of the followers which seems to be difficult to be shattered by the media. The controversies often draw harsh criticism on the part of the public.

Conclusion

The Impact on Middle-Class

When India got coloured in the policies of liberalisation, globalisation and privatisation, a class erupted on the Indian scene was middle-class. The policies changed the existing class system and the new emergent class got an amazing start to reap the benefits of the policies. Where on one side a new wave of economic opportunities approached this class, on the other side the economic advantage affected the social life in a drastic way. The trend of globalisation made a lot of items within the reach of a common man which were earlier considered to be symbols of luxury like cars. Undoubtedly, the economic scenario improved a lot but on the social front, we started competing with ourselves. The ushering in of international brands, competitive spirit and new values systems on one point attracted the middle class people but at the same time led to a never ending spirit of competition which initially seemed healthy. Their aspirations got wing with every individual wishing to soar as high as possible.

The urge to achieve more and more is intoxicating to the present day individuals. Gone are the times when a middle class family stressed on attaining the basic needs of the life namely bread, cloth and shelter. The middle class has risen above all of this. The life style now shimmers with the top most brands; the gadgets you possess, your movables and immovable, background of education, the salary figure determine your stand the society. And to match these benchmarks, the middle class works hard day and night ignoring the fact that they have a life to be taken care of, relationships to be nurtured. And at the end of the day when people return homes after giving every bit of theirs, they experience pressure which the modern time is piling upon them; their relations don't work, due to cut throat competition it becomes difficult for every person to reach where she/he wants to.

Here the role of modern day religious leaders comes to make things better for those who are stressed with their lives. According to the research, the middle class seems to be more driven towards babas than any other class (42%), as the rich people need no magic in their lives and poor people hardly have hopes to shine, but the middle class expects to reach at higher points and they seem to take refuge in babas who give them solutions and enlighten their life. They

experience a sort of positive energy when they believe in their leader's trust. The middle class people recount their experiences wherein they had their both personal and professional level problem solved. This faith according to them is driving their life and will keep on brightening their future. The religious leaders have been successful in drawing attention of the most vulnerable class of the society in terms of dreams and aspirations. It is not a big deal for middle class people to take out a little part of their income for babas for these babas would turn around their lives according to their belief. They consider baba God, an accessible one and rationality takes a back seat here.

Gender Neutrality in belief

It is difficult to say that the trend of babaism is affecting which gender the most. After listening to experiences of both male and female respondents, it is clear that gender here doesn't affect the devotion towards babas. It seems that the tensions shared by both the genders have commonality in the sense that both are human beings. So, there are not any opinion differences regarding the leader as such. The research has simply studied the age groups of both the genders to know that which age groups in both the gender are more into the belief. And as per the data analysis, in both the genders the age group of 20 to 30 has least number of followers whereas the maximum followers were found to be in the age group of 40 to 50. So it can be concluded that the gender here doesn't determine the popularity of the leader.

Role of Information and Technology

The reach of technology is also an important factor because of which the leader reaches masses. The religious leaders make social networking sites a medium to promote their cult. There are websites of such organisations. This helps the leader to have fame even at international level. People of the present age are techno savvy and hence get connected to such processes online. Through you tube, facebook and twitter etc. the leader's teachings reach a large number of people. The technological advancement has led to coming up grand features in mobile phones and other gadgets and it has turned out to be useful for the leaders to reach the young masses. People have found to register themselves to their favourite leader by signing up on the websites and subscribing to the organisation online. Through websites people share experiences in large numbers and keep them updated about the activities of the leader. Hence it becomes an open forum for people to come and share whatever they feel about their leader. And these websites also offer an insight into the number of followers and also tells about the fame leader even at a global level.

Intensity of Devotion

The leader is worshipped and celebrated by the devotees and since their devotion is based on the experiences with the leader, they have deep faith in the leader and refuse to pay heed to the controversies against the leader. Even after so much of exposure through media people deny to believe that their leader could be wrong in any way. People feel offensive when the image of the leader is put in question, their devotion overpowers them and they don't want their leader to

be put to test. There were 95% respondents who said that they never believe in any controversy related to their leader and there were 5% respondents who said that they were doubtful at times but people have a lot of respect for the leaders. Because of this reason it is sensitive to point out the leader and this would mean insulting the faith of the people and their reaction is unpredictable.

Charisma lingers on

It can be drawn out that the maximum respondents believe that the leader is in possession of extraordinary qualities which one in a million can possess. There are respondents who say that even when they look at the picture of the leader, they feel a strong attraction towards the leader, they experience an uncontrollable urge to follow the leader. Some people fell short on words to define the leader's charm. People say that they feel mesmerised when they listen to the word of the leader and they feel enlightened and positive towards life. People recounted their experiences in which they said that when they attend the leader's sessions they get overwhelmed with emotions on listening to the leader. The leader is supposed to have powers and can perform a lot of miracles. The people think high of their leader and believe that the leader possesses unique understanding power of the world and beyond that. The babas are able to lead so many people because of the charisma they possess. A lot of credit goes to their attire and the way they carry themselves in the community. The image of the leader therefore gets fit into the mind of the people and they see them just as the way they see God. To people, their leaders face glows because of purity and power that she/he possesses and they are very assertive when it comes to their belief. Charismatic leadership notes that a person whose leadership is of charismatic nature can make his followers act in unexpected ways.

The present era looks forward to the religious leadership infusing egalitarianism in the society and not making it a glittery affair. If we keep entertaining leadership of pompous sorts, it would hamper the truthfulness of faith and would put the world known spirituality of Indian nation to question. The religious leaders attain fame even at the international scene and when the same turn out to be involved in scams, it stains the image of religious beliefs of a country which is known to have cherished its religious values in all ages.

References

- Abernethy, B., Bole W. (2008). 'The Life of Meaning: Reflections on Faith, Doubt, and Repairing the World,' in *Pbs's Religion & Ethics*. New York: Seven Stories Press.
- Aron, R. (1967). *Main Currents in Sociological Thought*. New York: Basic Books.
- Cladis, M.S.(Ed.); Cosman , C.(translator) (2008).*Emile Durkheim: The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, New York. Oxford University Press
- Emerson, M.O.; Mirola, W.A.; Monahan ,S.C. (2011). *RELIGION MATTERS What Sociology Teaches Us About Religion in Our World*. New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall.

- Habib, I. (2010). *Religion in Indian History*. New Delhi: Tulika Books.
- Hitchens, C. (2008). *God is Not Great*. U.K.: Atlantic books.
- Hick, J.H. (2000). *Philosophy of Religion*. New Delhi: Phi Learning.
- Khan, M.W. (2009). *The Quran*, New Delhi: Goodword Books.
- Kundra, M.R. (2000). *Is Sai Baba God*. New Delhi: Graphic World.
- Luce, E. (2006). *In Spite Of The Gods*. London: Little Brown.
- Madan, R.T. (2000). *Religion in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press
- Michaels, A. (2006). *Hinduism: Past and Present*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman Private Limited.
- Prabhupada, S. (2001). *Thoughts on Synthesis of Science & Religion*. Kolkata: Bhaktivedanta Institute.
- Roof, J. (2003). *Pathways to God: A study guide to the teachings of Sathya Sai Baba*. Anantapur: Sri Sathya Books & Publications Trust.
- Shrimad Bhagwad Gita*, Delhi: Manoj Publications.
- Singh, K. (2004). *INDIA: An Introduction*, New Delhi: Vision Books.
- Thapar, R. (11th impression 2010). *History and Beyond*, U.K.: Oxford University Press.
- Vivekananda, S. (2008). *Study of Religion*. Uttarakhand: Advaita Ashrama.
-