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From Ashram to Prosecution: A Critical Study of Spiritual Frauds in India

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Spirituality: Meaning and Significance

Spirituality is a broad concept that can be understood in different ways by different people. It generally refers to an individual's connection with a higher power, the divine, or the deeper meaning and purpose of life. Spirituality goes beyond the physical world and recognizes the existence of a unifying force that connects all human beings despite differences in their backgrounds, beliefs, and circumstances. Many people view spirituality as a feeling of inner peace, awareness, and interconnectedness with others and with nature. It helps individuals explore important questions about life, purpose, values, and personal growth. In this sense, spirituality can be described as an experience of transcendent unity and a deeper understanding of existence.

Spirituality is often distinguished from religion. While religion usually involves following specific beliefs, practices, and traditions, spirituality is a more personal and individual experience. It focuses on inner awareness, self-discovery, and a sense of connection with something greater than oneself. For

some individuals, spirituality is closely linked to places of worship such as temples, mosques, churches, or other sacred spaces. For others, it is expressed through meditation, reflection, service to humanity, or a connection with nature. Since spiritual experiences are deeply personal, each individual's understanding of spirituality may vary and evolve over time based on life experiences.

As stated by Swami Vivekananda, "Spirituality is the science of the soul."¹ This perspective highlights spirituality as a path toward understanding one's inner self and achieving a deeper sense of meaning, harmony, and fulfilment in life.

Throughout history, spiritual leaders have played an important role in society by promoting values such as compassion, humility, tolerance, and self-control. They have helped individuals achieve inner peace and social harmony, thereby strengthening community life.

In recent times, however, the nature of spiritual leadership in India has changed in some cases. Alongside genuine spiritual teachers, there has been the rise of individuals who present themselves as spiritual guides without authentic traditions or genuine spiritual grounding. Some of these individuals operate more like commercial enterprises, focusing on financial gain, publicity, or influence rather than spiritual guidance. This shift has affected the traditional guru–disciple relationship. Instead of offering selfless guidance, certain figures have been accused of misusing the trust of followers for money, power, or social influence. Such developments underline the urgent necessity of addressing the growing menace of spiritual frauds, which not only exploit individual faith but also erode public trust in genuine spiritual practices and institutions.

¹ Swami Vivekananda (2015). "Lectures from Colombo to Almora", p.72, editionNEXT.com

Reconstruction of Spiritualism:

- The Cambridge dictionary defines Spirituality as, “The quality that involves deep feelings and beliefs of a religious nature, rather than the physical parts of life.”²
- Christina Puchalski, MD, Director of the George Washington Institute for Spirituality and Health, contends that "spirituality is the aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose and the way they experience their connectedness to the moment, to self, to others, to nature, and to the significant or sacred."³
- According to The Oxford dictionary, “Relating to or affecting the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things.”⁴

The earliest known recorded use of the term “spirituality” dates back to 1796, when it was associated with the 18th-century thinker Emanuel Swedenborg. Although the term “spirituality” gained wider academic and social recognition, there exists no universally accepted legal definition of the word either in India or in any other jurisdiction across the world. While sociology and philosophy have attempted to define spirituality as a personal or collective quest for meaning, inner consciousness, and transcendence, the law has remained silent in providing any precise or codified legal interpretation of the concept. However, the idea of spirituality has existed in India since ancient times, especially from the Vedic period. It has played an important role in shaping Indian philosophy, culture, and social life, and continues to influence society even today. That said, it is disheartening to observe that, in contemporary society,

² <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/spirituality>

³ <https://www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu/what-spirituality#:~:text=Christina%20Puchalski%2C%20MD%2C%20Director%20of,%2C%20to>

⁴ <https://www.lexico.com/definition/spiritual>

spirituality has increasingly drifted away from its true essence of voluntary inner awakening and moral guidance, and in many instances has assumed coercive, manipulative, and fraudulent dimensions. This disturbing transformation makes it essential to distinguish genuine spirituality, rooted in selflessness and enlightenment, from fabricated spiritual practices designed to exploit faith for personal gain.

Distinction Between True and Fake Spirituality

The debate surrounding spiritual fraud begins with a fundamental question: **What distinguishes genuine spirituality from its counterfeit version?**

True spirituality encourages self-awareness, moral development, intellectual inquiry, and personal growth. Authentic spiritual teachers do not demand blind obedience; rather, they encourage followers to cultivate wisdom, question assumptions, and discover truth through personal experience. Their teachings focus on service, humility, compassion, and ethical conduct. Genuine spirituality empowers individuals. It seeks to reduce dependency and increase self-reliance. A true spiritual guide serves as a mentor who illuminates a path but does not demand worship or unquestioning loyalty.

In contrast, fraudulent spirituality thrives on dependency, fear, and manipulation. Fake spiritual leaders often claim supernatural powers, divine status, or exclusive access to salvation. Instead of encouraging critical thinking, they discourage questioning and portray dissent as a sign of spiritual weakness or disloyalty. Where authentic spirituality promotes liberation, fraudulent spirituality promotes control. Where genuine faith encourages introspection, fake spirituality often revolves around personality worship. The distinction is not merely theological; it has significant social and legal implications because fraudulent spirituality frequently becomes a mechanism for financial exploitation, psychological manipulation, and abuse of power. Thus, a clear distinction

between true and fake spirituality lies in whether spiritual authority is used for selfless guidance and ethical upliftment or misused as a tool for control, deception, and exploitation, and Indian courts have repeatedly intervened through landmark judgments where individuals disguised as spiritual leaders were found to have committed serious criminal offences under the guise of religion and faith.

Sociology of Spiritualism

The success of spiritual frauds cannot be understood solely through the lens of religion. Psychological and social factors play a significant role in making individuals susceptible to manipulation. Many people seek spiritual guidance during periods of emotional distress. The loss of a loved one, financial hardship, chronic illness, family disputes, loneliness, or uncertainty about the future can create a deep desire for reassurance and certainty. In such circumstances, charismatic spiritual leaders often appear as sources of hope and stability.

Fraudulent gurus exploit these vulnerabilities by offering simple solutions to complex problems. They promise miraculous healing, financial prosperity, relief from suffering, and divine intervention and for individuals experiencing emotional turmoil, these promises can be extraordinarily appealing.

Methods Used by Self-Proclaimed Godmen to Exploit People⁵

Financial Exploitation

Financial exploitation is perhaps the most widespread form of spiritual fraud. Fraudulent spiritual leaders frequently persuade followers to make substantial donations by portraying financial contributions as acts of devotion or investments in spiritual progress.

⁵ Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *An Idealist View of Life* (George Allen & Unwin, 1932)

Devotees may be encouraged to contribute money, property, jewelry, or other assets. Donations are often presented as necessary for receiving divine blessings, overcoming misfortune, or attaining spiritual advancement. In many cases, followers are convinced that material sacrifice demonstrates faithfulness.

The absence of transparency in the management of funds frequently enables large-scale financial misconduct. Religious trusts and organizations controlled by fraudulent spiritual leaders may accumulate significant wealth while remaining largely insulated from scrutiny.

False Claims of Miracles and Supernatural Powers

Many spiritual frauds rely upon claims of supernatural abilities. Such claims may include miraculous healing, communication with divine entities, prophecy, materialization of objects, or the ability to remove curses and negative energies.

These assertions are often supported through staged demonstrations, fabricated testimonials, selective success stories, and deliberate concealment of failures. Followers who already possess strong emotional investment may interpret ordinary coincidences as evidence of miraculous intervention.

Psychological Manipulation

Psychological control is frequently more powerful than direct coercion. Fraudulent spiritual organizations often employ techniques designed to influence thought and behaviour.

These methods include repetitive messaging, public confessions, isolation from critics, emotional conditioning, and the cultivation of fear. Followers may be warned that questioning the guru will result in spiritual downfall, divine punishment, or personal misfortune.

Over time, the ability to evaluate claims objectively diminishes, creating an environment in which manipulation becomes normalized.

Sexual Exploitation

Numerous instances have emerged in which self-proclaimed spiritual leaders have used their authority to sexually exploit followers. Such exploitation often occurs under the guise of spiritual rituals, divine blessings, or secret teachings. Victims frequently remain silent due to social stigma, fear of retaliation, and emotional dependency upon the perpetrator. The abuse of spiritual authority for sexual gratification represents one of the most severe forms of spiritual fraud because it combines psychological manipulation with physical violation.

Political Influence and Institutional Power

Many fraudulent spiritual leaders cultivate relationships with influential political figures. Such associations enhance their credibility and expand their social reach.

Political patronage may also discourage investigation and accountability. As spiritual organizations grow in wealth and influence, they can become significant centres of social and political power, creating complex challenges for governance and law enforcement.

Spirituality and Constitutionalism

Although the Constitution of India and statutory laws do not provide a direct definition of spirituality, the idea is indirectly reflected in constitutional values such as freedom of thought, conscience, belief, and the right to live a meaningful life according to one's own understanding. These principles support the idea of individual spiritual freedom. The spirit of unity is also reflected in the Constitution. The opening words of the Preamble, "We, the people of India," represent the collective identity of all citizens and promote a sense of togetherness and equality. This idea reflects a feeling of unity and shared humanity. Similarly, Article 1 of the Constitution states, "India, that is Bharat, shall be a Union of States," which can be understood in harmony with the ancient Indian philosophy of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, meaning "the world is one family."

This highlights the idea that all people are connected as part of a single global community.⁶

While spirituality is not legally defined, its essence can be seen in the constitutional values of dignity, equality, moral development, and personal freedom. These principles encourage individuals to lead meaningful and responsible lives. India has long been a centre of spiritual thought, where various religious and philosophical traditions have guided people in understanding life and its purpose. However, in recent times, it has become increasingly evident that spirituality has, in several instances, deviated from its original essence of voluntary self-realisation, ethical guidance, and inner enlightenment, and has instead assumed coercive, manipulative, and fraudulent forms. The unchecked exploitation of faith for personal, financial, and social gain has exposed countless individuals to emotional, psychological, and economic abuse, thereby creating an urgent need for robust legal intervention. Such intervention has become essential not only to prevent fraudulent practices carried out under the guise of spirituality, but also to ensure accountability, protect vulnerable followers, and preserve the sanctity and credibility of genuine spiritual traditions.

Indian Legal Framework for Combating Spiritual Frauds:

The Indian Constitution guarantees religious freedom while simultaneously empowering the State to intervene against harmful practices.

Article 25 and Religious Freedom⁷

Article 25(1) of the Constitution guarantees to all persons the freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practise, and propagate religion. However, this right is not absolute. It is

⁶ <https://vasudaikakutumbam.wordpress.com/2015/03/05/vasudhaiva-kutumbakam>

⁷ Constitution of India, art. 25

expressly subject to public order, morality, health, and other fundamental rights.

The Constitution therefore does not protect criminal activities merely because they are committed under religious disguise. Fraud, sexual exploitation, violence, human sacrifice, and coercion cannot claim constitutional immunity.

The Supreme Court has repeatedly distinguished between genuine religious practices and exploitative customs masquerading as religion. The judiciary has consistently held that only “essential religious practices” deserve constitutional protection.

Article 51A(h): Duty to Develop Scientific Temper⁸

The Constitution imposes a fundamental duty upon every citizen “to develop scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform.”³ This provision assumes immense significance in combating superstition and irrational exploitation.

Scientific temper does not mean hostility towards religion. Rather, it means the ability to question practices that undermine human dignity, health, and constitutional morality.

Criminal Law and Spiritual Frauds in India

India does not yet possess a dedicated central legislation specifically targeting spiritual frauds. Nevertheless, several provisions under criminal law are invoked against fraudulent spiritual leaders.

Cheating and Dishonest Inducement

Under Section 318 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, cheating involves deceiving a person dishonestly to induce delivery of property or consent. Fraudulent godmen who obtain money by falsely claiming miraculous powers or divine intervention may attract liability under this provision.

⁸ Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, No. 45 of 2023, Section 318

Promises such as curing terminal diseases through spiritual rituals, removing curses for money, or guaranteeing supernatural solutions often amount to deception intended for unlawful gain.

Criminal Breach of Trust

Many spiritual institutions collect massive donations from followers. Where such funds are dishonestly misappropriated, criminal breach of trust provisions become applicable.

Devotees often donate property and wealth believing it will serve charitable or religious purposes. Misuse of such assets constitutes not merely moral betrayal but criminal misconduct.

Sexual Exploitation under the Guise of Spirituality

Several self-proclaimed spiritual leaders in India have been accused and convicted of rape, trafficking, wrongful confinement, and sexual assault. Such exploitation often occurs because victims are psychologically manipulated into believing that obedience to the spiritual leader is spiritually necessary.

The abuse of spiritual authority for sexual exploitation reflects one of the darkest dimensions of faith-based fraud. The law treats such offences as serious criminal violations irrespective of the accused's religious status.

Criminal Intimidation and Psychological Manipulation

Fraudulent spiritual leaders frequently threaten followers with divine punishment, curses, spiritual destruction, or bad karma in order to extort money or ensure obedience. Such acts may amount to criminal intimidation.

The fear generated through spiritual manipulation is often more psychologically devastating than ordinary threats because it attacks the deepest emotional and existential fears of individuals.

Drugs and Magic Remedies (Objectionable Advertisements) Act, 1954⁹

⁹ Drugs and Magic Remedies (Objectionable Advertisements) Act, No. 21 of 1954

The Drugs and Magic Remedies (Objectionable Advertisements) Act, 1954 was enacted to prohibit misleading advertisements relating to magical cures and miracle remedies. The legislation prohibits advertisements claiming magical treatment for specified diseases and disorders. Its objective is to protect vulnerable individuals from exploitation through pseudo-scientific and supernatural medical claims.

Even today, countless advertisements continue to promise miraculous cures for infertility, paralysis, cancer, sexual disorders, and mental illness through spiritual remedies. Such claims exploit desperation and often prevent patients from seeking genuine medical treatment.

The Act remains one of the earliest legislative attempts in India to regulate fraudulent supernatural claims.

Consumer Protection and Commercial Spiritual Services¹⁰

The Consumer Protection Act, 2019 may also apply where spiritual organisations provide services in exchange for payment. False claims, deceptive advertisements, and unfair trade practices can attract legal consequences under consumer law.

Modern spiritual enterprises often function as commercial institutions selling books, therapies, online courses, healing sessions, and ritual services. Where profit-making becomes the dominant objective, legal accountability becomes unavoidable.

State Legislations against Superstition and Black Magic

The absence of a comprehensive national law has compelled several states to enact specific anti-superstition and anti-witch-hunting legislations.

¹⁰ Consumer Protection Act, No. 35 of 2019

Maharashtra Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices and Black Magic Act, 2013¹¹

Maharashtra became the first Indian state to enact a comprehensive anti-superstition law following the assassination of rationalist Dr. Narendra Dabholkar.

The legislation criminalises:

- Human sacrifice;
- Assault in the name of exorcism;
- Claims of supernatural powers for monetary gain;
- Fraudulent miracle cures;
- Inhuman rituals;
- Physical abuse in the name of spirituality;
- Black magic practices causing harm.

The Act is significant because it carefully balances religious freedom with protection from exploitation. It expressly clarifies that genuine religious practices are not prohibited unless they involve deception, violence, or exploitation.

The law symbolises a constitutional commitment to rationality and human dignity.

Karnataka Prevention and Eradication of Inhuman Evil Practices and Black Magic Act, 2017¹²

The Karnataka legislation similarly criminalises exploitative occult practices and black magic. It prohibits rituals involving physical harm, degrading treatment, paranormal exploitation, and fraudulent supernatural claims.

The Act reflects growing recognition that blind faith can become a tool of systemic abuse.

¹¹ Maharashtra Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices and Black Magic Act, No. 24 of 2013

¹² Karnataka Prevention and Eradication of Inhuman Evil Practices and Black Magic Act, No. 16 of 2017

Odisha Prevention of Witch-Hunting Act, 2013¹³

Witch-branding remains a brutal social reality in several parts of India. Women, especially widows and socially vulnerable individuals, are frequently accused of witchcraft and subjected to violence.

The Odisha Prevention of Witch-Hunting Act, 2013 criminalises witch-branding and associated harassment. The Act seeks to protect victims from psychological torture, social exclusion, and physical violence committed in the name of superstition.

Bihar Prevention of Witch (Daain) Practices Act, 1999¹⁴

This legislation prohibits identifying women as witches and punishes torture, humiliation, and violence associated with such accusations.

Jharkhand Witchcraft Prevention Act, 2001

The Jharkhand law addresses similar exploitative practices and aims to protect vulnerable women from violence rooted in superstition.

Rajasthan Prevention of Witch-Hunting Act, 2015¹⁵

The Rajasthan legislation criminalises witch-hunting practices and provides penalties for physical and mental harassment.

Judicial Trends in Spirituality**1. CBI v. Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh¹⁶**

One of the most significant sets of cases involves Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, the head of Dera Sacha Sauda. He was convicted by a CBI special court in 2017 for the rape of two female disciples and sentenced to twenty years of rigorous imprisonment. In a separate but related matter, he was also convicted for his role in the

¹³ Odisha Prevention of Witch-Hunting Act, No. 7 of 2013

¹⁴ Bihar Prevention of Witch (Daain) Practices Act, No. 9 of 1999

¹⁵ Rajasthan Prevention of Witch-Hunting Act, No. 3 of 2015

¹⁶ CBI v. Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, CBI Special Court, Panchkula (2017)

2002 murder conspiracy of journalist Ram Chander Chhatrapati, who had reported allegations against the Dera. The courts found that his position as a spiritual leader was used to control followers and suppress dissent, and the convictions reinforced that criminal conspiracy and sexual offences are prosecutable regardless of religious influence or social standing.

2. State of Rajasthan v. Asaram Bapu (2018)¹⁷

Another widely cited case involves Asaram Bapu, who was convicted by a special court in Jodhpur in 2018 for the rape of a minor girl at his ashram. He was sentenced to life imprisonment for the remainder of his natural life. Courts in this and related proceedings observed that the accused had used his spiritual image and ashram environment to gain the trust of followers and commit serious offences. Multiple other criminal cases against him, including allegations of intimidation and sexual abuse, are still part of ongoing litigation in various jurisdictions. The judiciary has repeatedly rejected arguments that spiritual status can dilute criminal responsibility.

3. State of Karnataka v. Arunachalam Rajasekaran @ Nithyananda

Swami Nithyananda, another controversial figure, has faced several criminal complaints in Karnataka, including allegations of sexual assault and wrongful confinement of disciples. While some proceedings are still ongoing, the courts have treated these allegations seriously within the framework of criminal law, particularly focusing on whether consent can be considered valid in environments where spiritual authority and psychological influence may overpower

¹⁷ Sessions Case No. 24/2013, Special Court, Jodhpur (2018)

individual autonomy. His cases have also highlighted the legal scrutiny applied to ashram-based institutions where allegations of coercion arise.

4. State of Kerala v. Santosh Madhavan

In Kerala, Santosh Madhavan, also known as Swami Amrit Chaitanya, was convicted for rape and financial fraud. Investigations revealed that he had used his assumed spiritual identity to gain access to vulnerable individuals and commit serious offences, including sexual abuse of minors. The court's findings emphasized that spiritual branding was misused as a tool for deception and exploitation.

5. Premananda v. State¹⁸

A historically important precedent comes from the Supreme Court in the Premananda case, where the conviction for rape and murder was upheld. The Court made it clear that religious or spiritual identity cannot override criminal accountability and that offences committed within religious institutions must be judged using the same evidentiary standards as any other criminal case. This judgment is often cited as a foundational authority in cases involving abuse of spiritual power.

6. CBI v. Chandraswami

Cases involving Chandraswami also illustrate the intersection of spirituality and financial crime. He faced prosecution in connection with violations of foreign exchange laws and cheating allegations. Although politically influential, the courts allowed the proceedings to continue, reinforcing the principle that legal accountability applies equally regardless of social or political connections.

¹⁸ (2005) 8 SCC 769

7. **Nikki Gupta v. Radhe Maa**

Similarly, cases involving figures like Radhe Maa have primarily dealt with allegations of dowry harassment and misuse of influence, with courts overseeing investigations and bail matters under general criminal law provisions. Although not all allegations have resulted in conviction, the proceedings highlight judicial willingness to examine claims of coercion or misuse of spiritual identity within family or social disputes.

8. **State of Haryana v. Rampal**

Another notable instance is the Rampal case in Haryana, where the spiritual leader of Satlok Ashram faced charges including murder, unlawful confinement, and obstruction of justice. The confrontation between followers and law enforcement led to large-scale legal proceedings, reinforcing the principle that even religious or sect-like institutions are subject to state authority and criminal law enforcement.

Social Media and the Commercialisation of Spirituality:

The rise of social media has transformed the manner in which religion and spirituality are consumed in contemporary society. Spirituality, which was once rooted in personal introspection, philosophical inquiry, and community interaction, has increasingly become a digital spectacle. In India, the emergence of self-claimed godmen and commercial spiritual influencers on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, and X (formerly Twitter) demonstrates how faith has entered the age of aggressive marketing and algorithmic manipulation.¹⁹

Social media has become one of the most powerful instruments through which fraudulent spiritual leaders expand their

¹⁹ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Free Press, 1912)

influence, construct cult-like followings, generate enormous wealth, and shield themselves from criticism. These platforms enable such individuals to reach millions of people instantly without any meaningful regulatory oversight. Through carefully curated online identities, emotional narratives, miracle claims, and digital propaganda, they commercialise faith and convert spirituality into a profitable brand.

The danger lies not merely in religious preaching through technology. Every individual possesses the constitutional freedom to practise and propagate religion. The problem arises when social media becomes a mechanism for psychological manipulation, economic exploitation, misinformation, blind devotion, and organised fraud.

The Digital Transformation of Spiritual Authority

Traditionally, spiritual influence was localised and community-based. Spiritual leaders derived legitimacy through scholarship, ethical conduct, asceticism, and social service. In the digital era, however, popularity itself has become a substitute for credibility. Social media allows self-claimed godmen to bypass institutional scrutiny and directly access audiences. A person with persuasive speaking skills, dramatic presentation, and technological support can manufacture an image of divinity within a short period of time. The number of followers, views, and shares often creates an illusion of authenticity. People begin to equate online popularity with spiritual wisdom.

Digital platforms reward emotional and sensational content. Therefore, videos involving “miracles,” supernatural predictions, healing rituals, emotional testimonials, and dramatic religious performances spread rapidly. Algorithms amplify content that provokes fear, hope, curiosity, or emotional dependency, precisely the emotions that fraudulent spiritual leaders seek to exploit.

As a result, spirituality is increasingly presented not as a path of self-reflection but as a consumable product marketed through digital entertainment techniques.

Methods Used by Self-Claimed Godmen on Social Media

1. Creation of a Divine Online Persona

One of the primary strategies adopted by self-proclaimed spiritual leaders is the creation of a carefully controlled online image. Professional teams manage their accounts, videos, public relations campaigns, and digital branding.

These individuals are often portrayed as:

- Miracle healers;
- Divine incarnations;
- Spiritual scientists;
- Gurus with supernatural powers;
- Protectors of humanity;
- Messengers chosen by God.

Their social media profiles frequently contain dramatic music, edited visuals, emotional speeches, symbolic clothing, and choreographed public appearances designed to create psychological influence.

The digital image is intentionally constructed to appear larger than life. Followers begin to perceive such personalities not as ordinary human beings but as spiritually superior beings beyond criticism.²⁰

2. Exploitation through Emotional Content

Social media content produced by such individuals often targets emotionally vulnerable audiences.

Videos and messages commonly focus on:

- Fear of failure;
- Family problems;
- Illness and suffering;

²⁰ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Longmans, Green & Co., 1902)

- Financial insecurity;
- Relationship crises;
- Anxiety about the future;
- Fear of divine punishment.

The spiritual leader then presents himself as the ultimate solution to these problems. Followers are promised peace, success, healing, prosperity, or protection in exchange for devotion, obedience, or monetary contribution. The emotional dependency created through repeated digital exposure gradually weakens rational thinking.

3. Commercialisation through Online Donations and Paid Spirituality

Many self-claimed godmen use social media to build highly profitable commercial structures.

Common monetisation techniques include:

- Paid online darshans and blessings;
- Subscription-based spiritual courses;
- Monetised YouTube channels;
- Sale of spiritual products;
- Paid meditation programmes;
- Digital astrology consultations;
- Donations through payment gateways;
- Online “miracle healing” sessions;
- Premium membership communities.

Spirituality is transformed into a business model where followers become consumers and devotion becomes a source of recurring income.

In several cases, spiritual organisations market products ranging from herbal medicines and cosmetics to real estate projects and investment schemes. The spiritual leader’s image functions as a commercial brand generating enormous profits.²¹

²¹ Swami Vivekananda, Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda (Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, reprint ed.)

4. Spreading Superstition and Pseudoscience

Social media has become a fertile ground for the spread of irrational beliefs and pseudo-scientific claims.

Fraudulent spiritual influencers frequently circulate misinformation such as:

- Miraculous cures for serious diseases;
- Anti-scientific medical advice;
- Claims of supernatural healing powers;
- Black magic remedies;
- Astrology-based fear propaganda;
- Rituals promising instant wealth or success.

Such misinformation becomes particularly dangerous during public health crises when vulnerable individuals may abandon scientific medical treatment in favour of unverified spiritual remedies.

The rapid spread of such content through WhatsApp forwards and short videos creates an ecosystem where superstition is normalised.

5. Cult Formation and Psychological Control

Social media enables the creation of virtual cult communities. Followers are encouraged to consume content continuously, share propaganda, defend the spiritual leader online, and reject criticism.²²

Over time, devotees begin to derive identity and belonging from the digital community surrounding the spiritual figure. This produces psychological dependency.

Criticism of the spiritual leader is often portrayed as:

- Sinful;
- Anti-religious;
- Spiritually dangerous;
- A conspiracy against faith.

²² Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *An Idealist View of Life* (George Allen & Unwin, 1932)

As a result, followers may become emotionally incapable of questioning exploitation even when evidence of wrongdoing emerges. The online environment creates an echo chamber where dissent is discouraged and blind loyalty is rewarded.

Spiritual Exploitation and Its Socio-Legal Ramifications:

1. Erosion of Rational Thinking

One of the most damaging effects is the decline of critical reasoning and scientific temper. Constant exposure to miracle claims and pseudo-scientific narratives weakens public trust in evidence-based thinking.

Article 51A(h) of the Constitution imposes a duty upon citizens to develop scientific temper and the spirit of inquiry. However, the unchecked spread of digital superstition undermines this constitutional vision.

A society that begins to value blind faith over rationality becomes vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation.

2. Financial Exploitation of Vulnerable Individuals

Many followers donate large sums of money believing that spiritual blessings will solve personal difficulties. Poor and emotionally distressed individuals are especially vulnerable. Families sometimes lose savings, jewellery, land, or property under the influence of manipulative spiritual propaganda.²³

The exploitation becomes more dangerous because it is disguised as voluntary devotion rather than recognised as fraud.

3. Psychological Dependency and Emotional Manipulation

Continuous digital engagement creates emotional attachment between followers and spiritual influencers.

Devotees may begin to:

- Depend emotionally upon the guru;
- Seek approval for personal decisions;
- Experience fear when questioning authority;

²³ Narendra Dabholkar, *The Case for Reason: Understanding the Anti-Superstition Movement in India* (Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 2014)

- Isolate themselves from critics or family members.

Such dependency can severely affect mental health and personal autonomy

4. Undermining Genuine Spirituality

The aggressive marketing of commercial spirituality distorts the meaning of genuine spiritual practice.

Traditional spirituality emphasised:

- Self-discipline;
- Compassion;
- Simplicity;
- Inner transformation;
- Ethical conduct.

Digital commercial spirituality often replaces these values with celebrity culture, material success, and blind obedience.

As spirituality becomes entertainment-oriented, its philosophical and ethical depth diminishes.

5. Social Polarisation and Manipulation

Certain self-claimed godmen use social media influence for political mobilisation and ideological propaganda.

Because they command large follower bases, they can shape public opinion, influence elections, and intensify social divisions. The combination of religious authority and digital influence creates immense social power without democratic accountability.

This threatens constitutional values of secularism, equality, and social harmony.

6. Exploitation of Women and Marginalised Communities

Women and socially vulnerable individuals are often disproportionately affected.

Social media propaganda portraying spiritual leaders as divine or infallible can silence victims of abuse. Fear of public

shaming, spiritual guilt, or social backlash discourages complaints.²⁴

In several cases, women subjected to exploitation by spiritual leaders remained silent because they feared being labelled anti-religious.

Conclusion and Suggestions

The growing commercialization of faith and the increasing misuse of spiritual influence in contemporary India necessitate the adoption of effective legal, social, and constitutional measures aimed at safeguarding the sanctity of religion while simultaneously protecting individuals from exploitation, manipulation, and abuse carried out under the guise of spirituality.

Strengthening Legal Regulation and Accountability of Religious Institutions

One of the most effective measures for addressing spiritual frauds in India is the establishment of stronger legal regulation and institutional accountability. Religious organizations and spiritual institutions that collect public donations or operate large-scale financial activities should be subjected to transparent auditing and financial scrutiny. Mandatory disclosure of sources of income, expenditure, and property ownership can help prevent misuse of public faith for personal enrichment. The State must also ensure strict enforcement of criminal laws relating to cheating, sexual offences, illegal confinement, intimidation, and financial fraud committed under the guise of spirituality. Legal immunity based on religious influence or political connections must not be permitted to obstruct the administration of justice.

Promoting Scientific Temper and Constitutional Awareness

The long-term solution to spiritual exploitation lies in the promotion of scientific temper, constitutional morality, and

²⁴ Ram Puniyani, Religion, Power and Violence: Expression of Politics in Contemporary Times (Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2005)

rational awareness among citizens. Blind faith often flourishes where critical thinking and legal awareness are absent. Educational institutions, civil society organizations, and public authorities should actively encourage individuals to question exploitative practices disguised as miracles or divine intervention. Article 51A(h) of the Constitution of India recognizes the development of scientific temper and humanism as a fundamental duty of every citizen. Therefore, creating awareness about constitutional values and rational inquiry is essential to protect society from emotional and psychological manipulation carried out in the name of religion.

Regulating Misleading Spiritual Content on Digital Platforms

The misuse of social media for promoting false miracles, deceptive spiritual claims, and emotional manipulation requires urgent regulatory attention. Digital platforms should develop stricter mechanisms to identify and restrict fraudulent religious advertisements, fabricated healing claims, and misleading spiritual propaganda intended to exploit vulnerable audiences. Content that promotes financial exploitation or encourages blind obedience under the guise of spirituality should be subjected to legal scrutiny. Public awareness campaigns regarding digital misinformation and online manipulation can further help individuals recognize exploitative content and avoid becoming victims of organized spiritual fraud.

Encouraging Responsible Media Reporting on Spiritual Leaders

The media plays a crucial role in shaping public perception regarding spiritual personalities and religious institutions. Sensational glorification of self-styled godmen without proper scrutiny often contributes to the creation of personality cults and blind public devotion. Responsible journalism must therefore focus on factual reporting, investigative analysis, and public accountability rather than promoting individuals as

unquestionable spiritual authorities. Media institutions should ensure that allegations of exploitation, abuse, or financial misconduct involving influential religious figures are investigated and presented objectively without fear or political pressure.

Providing Legal Protection and Support to Victims

Many victims of spiritual fraud remain silent due to fear, social stigma, emotional dependence, or threats from influential organizations. It is therefore necessary to establish effective support mechanisms for victims, including legal aid, psychological counselling, witness protection, and confidential complaint systems. Victims should be encouraged to report exploitative practices without fear of social isolation or retaliation. The justice delivery system must also adopt a sensitive and victim-centred approach while dealing with cases involving religious exploitation and abuse.²⁵

Distinguishing Genuine Spirituality from Commercial Exploitation

Society must learn to distinguish between genuine spiritual guidance and commercialized manipulation. Authentic spirituality promotes ethical conduct, self-discipline, compassion, humility, and personal growth, whereas fraudulent spiritual practices rely upon fear, blind obedience, material greed, and personality worship. Public discourse should encourage individuals to evaluate spiritual teachings through reason, morality, and constitutional values rather than unquestioning emotional attachment. Spirituality should remain a means of inner development and social harmony, not a mechanism for economic exploitation or authoritarian control.

Ensuring Political Neutrality in Matters of Religious Exploitation

²⁵ V.N. Shukla, Constitution of India (Mahendra P. Singh ed., Eastern Book Company, Lucknow, 14th ed., 2022)

Political patronage often enables fraudulent spiritual leaders to evade investigation and accountability. The State must therefore maintain strict neutrality and impartiality in matters involving allegations against influential religious figures. Criminal investigations should proceed solely on the basis of evidence and legal principles without interference arising from political interests or vote-bank considerations. Equal application of law, irrespective of religious status or public influence, is essential for preserving public confidence in the justice system and the rule of law.

Creating Public Awareness Through Education and Social Reform

Social reform and public awareness campaigns are indispensable for combating spiritual frauds in India. Educational programs should emphasize ethical reasoning, legal literacy, and awareness regarding fraudulent religious practices. Community discussions, academic debates, and awareness initiatives can help citizens recognize manipulative techniques commonly employed by exploitative spiritual organizations. A socially aware and legally informed population is less likely to become vulnerable to psychological and financial exploitation in the name of faith.

Thus, the solution to spiritual frauds does not lie in opposing religion or undermining genuine spirituality. Rather, the objective must be to preserve the sanctity of faith from commercialization, deception, and abuse. India's spiritual traditions have historically emphasized truth, morality, compassion, and self-realization; these values must not be overshadowed by greed and exploitation disguised as divine authority. A balanced approach combining legal accountability, constitutional morality, rational awareness, and social responsibility is essential to ensure that faith remains a source of ethical guidance and spiritual upliftment rather than becoming a commodity in the hands of manipulative individuals.