

The paradox of faith

When protesters let their ego overcome their faith, they are no longer true disciples of their god



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Every day we see people brazenly driving through red lights, breaking queues with impunity or getting their way through bribes. Each time I see this, I despair, but then these people invoke a particular reason to justify their actions. They say that they act in this manner because they have lost faith in the police, the government or just the people around them. They take the law into their own hands because they have lost faith in something or the other.

Promises, hope and the future

There are many kinds of faith: faith in a person, a system, a government; faith in systems of thought like liberalism and secularism. Having faith in a person often means that we believe that the person will live up to our expectations. Similarly, when we have faith in a government, we believe that the government will live up to what we think it will do.

Faith is also related to promise. Faith in a government could mean that we believe that the government will deliver on its promises. Thus, faith is not just belief but a qualified belief related to expectations and fulfilling promises. Even in these cases, it is not easy to 'prove' that the faith is justified. There are many who will continue to have faith in a government although the government may not have lived up to its promises.

Faith is sustained very often by hope. Faith in a person is not about some belief about that person. It is the hope that this person will continue to behave in the expected manner. Faith in its most profound sense is really about the future and is most often an expression of promise and hope.

The future is indeed a problem. It is radically unpredictable. That is, you cannot even attempt to find models of prediction of one's life in the future. In the face of this unpredictability, our daily life is filled with moments of faith. For example, we have faith that nature is not unpredictable and that the solid ground will not



"All faith has some notion of trust and surrender but true faith in god has often been equated with complete surrender." The Tantri performing the Padipooja at the Ayyappa temple in Sabarimala. ■ H.VIBHU

turn into water at the next moment. We can act because we have faith in the constancy of the world around us. That is why when people we know well behave unpredictably it can be quite a shock to us.

Faith in the constancy of nature cannot be 'proved'. Having faith in nature is to have a belief that nature will live up to our expectations of it. Faith is thus always more than mere believing. It is about expectations, promises, hope and the future. None of these can really be 'proved' in the usual meaning of the term since by definition they are all yet to happen.

Faith in god

And then there is god. One could also have faith in god. What kind of a faith is this? At its core, there is not much difference between the meaning of faith mentioned above and the case of the divine. Faith in god might mean any of the following: that god exists, that god will fulfil our expectations, that we can trust god to take care of us, and so on. Since faith is one way we engage with the unknown future, it should not be a surprise to find that there is an intrinsic

relation between god and time. These positions range from the idea that god is time to god conquers time. For many, faith in god is as much a way of discovering some hope about the future.

But there is a difference between faith in god and faith in humans or social systems. This has to do with the autonomy of the individual. Whatever our beliefs are, there is one central core to our behaviour. This is the assertion of our individuality, of not trusting anything or anyone completely. There is always a crack in our trust and faith.

The meaning of true faith

What distinguishes faith in god as against faith in everything else is the tension between human autonomy and complete faith. This is very well exemplified by life-changing religious experiences. Almost without exception, all religious mystics have had moments when they have undergone a major crisis about their belief. This crisis is often manifested as a strong doubt in their belief in god. They struggle through this crisis and only when they come out of it do

they really achieve true faith.

All faith has some notion of trust and surrender but true faith in god has often been equated with complete surrender. In the tradition of Ramanuja and bhakti saints, this is the true sense of *saranagati*: completely surrendering oneself to god. One of the most important consequences of this surrender is that the devotees cannot begin to think that their faith is more important than the divine. They can act as agents to protect human interests related to religious institutions but they manifest a crack in their faith when they begin to privilege their own autonomy. This is well illustrated in the apocryphal story about Vivekananda. When he was upset at what he thought were attempts to destroy temples, goddess Kali is reputed to have asked him whether he was protecting her or she was protecting him. In the name of faith if we think we become protectors of gods, then we have lost true faith. When we act in this manner, we are only showing that we are not capable of true surrender and trust that are needed of the faith in the divine.

This really is the paradox of faith: true faith demands the autonomous choice of giving up our autonomy. The paradox arises from our inability to surrender completely, to completely trust our faith. When humans decide to act to protect their gods, they are only manifesting their lack of trust in god as well as their belief that they have to act to protect the divine. The recent happenings in Kerala are a classic instance of this fractured belief.

And so, just as in the case of people breaking various rules of society, when faith breaks down we take law into our own hands. Those who took the law into their hands at Sabarimala by refusing to abide by the Supreme Court's directives may think that they are expressing their loss of faith in the police, the Supreme Court and the Kerala government. But they also lost their true faith in their god when they decided to act in the manner they did. When they let their ego and self-importance overcome their faith, they were no longer the true disciples of their god.

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