

**IN SEARCH OF SANITY IN MODERN INDIA****DR. POOJA AGARWAL**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Rather than being a condition, “sanity,” is often a range, including the parameters of permissible behaviour. The current paper delves into the definitions and implications of the term in context with contemporary India, arguing that the displacement of Indians, first with the advent of the British, and later with the Partition, impacted Indian due to the imposition of Western models. And thereby, what was absorbed in the structure of Indian familial and societal unit, stood out like an anomalous sore thumb. Bombardment of cultural memes further polarizes the Indian psyche. And today we stand divided and conflicted.*

**Keywords:** Insanity, Culture, Self-Actualization, Artist**What's in a Name . . .**

What is Sanity: The English word “sane,” is derived from the Latin word *sanus*, and when simply put, it means healthy mind. Understood as a “soundness of mind,” the World Health Organization, defines mental health as “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community” (“Mental Health: Strengthening our Response”). This definition of mental health clearly focuses on one's ability to be productive, and be able to handle stress. Under this definition, individual is a unit of the society and his/her wellbeing is determined by his contribution towards society's wellbeing. On the other spectrum is C. L. M. Keyes' delineation of the three components of mental health: emotional wellbeing, social wellbeing, and psychological wellbeing.

One can understand social wellbeing as an individual's interactions with society and the integration of his/her self with the value-system of the socio-cultural milieu around. In this sense, at least metaphorically, social self can be seen as the Freudian superego, the part of an individual's psyche that interprets social norms and existing set of ethical contracts. The individual immediately gets located in the network of social relationships. The emotional wellbeing, being determined by a person's sense of holistic self, which is based on the belief that one is predominantly experiencing happiness, exploring opportunities, and can look towards the future with optimism and hope. This emotional self, which is far more personal and individual and also a significant determinant of how one conceives one's own life, can be seen as the Freudian ego, a montage of manifested behaviour and responses that illustrate one's personhood. The psychological self is a bit more subtle, just like the Freudian id, which is the seat of one's interior life, the motivations and also the inhibitions. When added to these three layers, the concept of self-actualization (Maslow), the view of sanity becomes diagrammatically opposite to the former view as this places human's individual self as the very core determinant of sanity.

Between the two views, sanity is like a range, a range of acceptable behaviour and acceptable emotions. It is a fine balance between what one's projected self and one's interior life: the life which is allowed to spill out in Freudian slips and puns. And of course, art and literature. To say that art mimics life, is to say the obvious, perhaps for the millionth time. But our modern understanding also elucidates that life mimics art. Creative expressions provide an inspirational benchmark and even an unflinching legitimization of ideas hitherto rejected.

Let us consider the case of India. A developing economy, liberalized only three decades ago, supporting world's second largest population, and some of world's most densely populated urban areas, with the rate of unemployment touching a whopping ten percent, what is sane and what isn't becomes jeeringly questionable and mockingly ridiculous. For example, productivity, even in terms of monetary value addition is far from being a norm; and reaching one's optimum potential, a faraway dream. In such a scenario, mere productivity need not always be an effective criterion towards determination and classification of insanity. Further, in the case of defining one's selfhood, the Western norms are very different from the Eastern ones. For example: existence of joint family systems, attitude towards adolescents (that of control), and attitude towards the elderly (respect or sly civility). Differences can be seen in expectations from an individual and also in the way major milestones of life (completing education, marriage, parenting, etc.) are considered more fixed. Added to this are factors like economic disparity, illiteracy, access to resources, caste and gender discrimination, religious diktats, attitude towards sexuality, etc. Thus, when considering the issue of sanity, modern India needs to be studied not as a monolithic whole, but as fragments of a mosaic, each an individual piece, and more importantly, it will then remain upon the reader to make sense of the mosaic. And perhaps, that's why while understanding the representation of insanity in Indian culture, one cannot consider that culture itself as a monolithic whole.

### **Ayurveda and Insanity: Lost and Found**

The classical Indian medicine system, Ayurveda, has a lesser known branch by the name of "*bhuta vidya*," which claims to include in its purview all those illnesses the cause of which remains a mystery and thus the ailments themselves are considered otherworldly or supernatural. Interestingly, this branch concerns itself most with human behaviour, and any kind of strangeness that challenged or flouted the norm was deemed fit to fall in this category. The word "*bhuta*," when translated, means ghost. And thus, the cultural representations of psychiatric ailments are often accompanied by tantric wielding a wand of straws, and wearing a garland of human skulls, not much unlike Ma Kali, one of the forms of prakriti, or nature. Interestingly, nature has far stronger and deeper impact on our behaviour than we are ready to believe. The word "*lunatic*" had as its root the word "*luna*" meaning moon. It is common knowledge now that moon exerts an influence over the human mind. The menstrual cycle of the women follows a lunar calendar, and a systematic study may yield that before human sexuality became pervasive from cyclical, the menstrual cycle too could be aligned with waxing and waning of the moon, and so could the "*moods*."

Today the tenets of "*bhuta vidya*" are rubbished, because the word *bhoot* is interpreted as ghost, which comes directly from Christian theology, and in that way, it completely bypasses the ancient Indian concept of *atma*, which sees *ananda* as the purpose of human life and *shaanta rasa* as the ultimate end. Between these two, dissatisfaction arises out of disproportionate desire (Buddhism), or unresolved issues (*Gita*).

Ayurveda was lost to the Indians a very long time ago. And westernization of Indian thought with the advent of the British introduced to the Indians a plethora of new images. Quite ironically, the British reclaimed Indian scriptures (including the Ayurveda) from oblivion. But while East went to the West simply as an exoticized respite, the West came to the colonized mind as a model to be imitated, a standard to be matched.

Who were then the “insane” ones in history? The definition and status of insanity has undergone a sea change with the growth and spread of civilizations. If we were to go back to the earliest civilizations, we would see mental disorders as being associated with the god’s antagonist: the devil. The opposite of divine: diabolical. That is to say that any kind of abnormal behaviour had religious and moral implications, and thus, it was only that which was normal that was considered to be on the right side of god. The stigma associated with mental illness sure goes a long way back.

While this view continued to prevail, amongst the physicians and the healers, the other aspect, the physiological one, of mental illness in the ancient culture was understood as being an imbalance within the physical body: imbalance between yin and yang (China), the imbalance of three body fluids: “*tridosha*” (India), imbalance in the four humours (Greece and Rome). However, the othering of those considered mentally unhealthy continued. But this is not as black / white as it may first appear to be. For the ones susceptible to altered states of mind were often hailed as having divine powers, like the priest presiding over Delphi’s Oracle. But this was only for those who had power on their side, for others were simply raving mad. Or on the other side of law with their lop-sided ideas (Jesus) and the threat of growing number of followers. Thus, plural, divided, and challenging views

In the Meso-American societies, the herbologists with an intimate knowledge of plants, roots, and seeds were understood as healers or “shamans,” and they were also the ones who, under the influence of “*ayahuasca*,” went into a trance to converse with the other-world. Same held true for their counterparts in North America. Greek culture with its poets going into a state of trance, the people of Canaan and their prophets, and the cult of dancing Shiva, the *Natarajan*, all in one way or another, associate altered states of mind as the domain of the artists and story-tellers, shamans and priests, herbologists and healers. And one cannot forget, that in the ancient Greek civilization, epilepsy was understood as the god’s syndrome.

### **Towards Illness**

The 1961 book *Madness and Civilization*, by the French philosopher, Michel Foucault, argues that in the Western Hemisphere, up unto the Renaissance, the “insane” were integrated as artists in the society. But this changed with the Age of Reason. And suddenly we became what has been referred to as the “rationalizing beings” (Freud). In the case of India, those individuals who went beyond the periphery of moderation were either artists or even saints, the renouncing ascetics in search of an eternal truth. Buddha was a product of such a belief system, as was Ram Krishna Paramhansa, and even Guru Nanak. But no less of a celebrity was an artist—painter, illustrator, singer, writer, and even weavers like carpet and shawl makers. These individuals got eager patronage in the Mughal court and in the *darbars* of the Rajput kings. Creativity was channelized, fits of fancy not ridiculed, and an experience of acute pain was seen as the doorway to God.

But this changed with the advent of the British. Firstly, Indian art for at least the first hundred years was completely looked down upon, till the time sporadic efforts by Indologists like William Jones and Max Mueller were made to retrieve Indian art and epics from oblivion. But by this time, the damage had already been done, and what Ngugi wa Thiong'o referred to as "cultural bomb" (qtd. in Nayar 183), already dropped on India. Bengal Presidency of the British Raj which came into being in the 1757, after the Battle of Plassey, was the first Indian region to be culturally Anglicized. In the absence of one central king, the affluent Thakurs of Bengal Presidency eagerly took up Shakespeare and Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats, John Constable and William Godwin, Queen Anne Furniture, and tea in delicately decorated chintz cups.

This was the first of displacements for those who went over the edge, or whose brain circuiting necessitated going over the edge, isolation, and single-minded focus. Patronage across India dwindled, and to make matters worse, India's ruling masters entered Industrial Revolution, and India became the hub of British activity. When the first of batches of neatly finished and printed fabrics, smooth, shining utensils, and attractive toys for children, and colourful paperbacks appeared in the Indian market, not even the artist, but also the craftsmen suffered a heavy blow. And for once in the Indian history, the artist, the "lunatic" was shunned as a delusional maniac.

But this was only the beginning. Firstly, as already mentioned, the Indian art and the Indian artist were suppressed by the colonizing masters. But, what happened next was far more dangerous: replacement of a cultural ethos. The British imposed upon India their own language, and went on to completely supplant Indian value system and world view. A utilitarian outlook saw productivity as a prerequisite of sanity. And eventually, in a nation teeming with population, any despondency emerging due to unemployment, low academic performance, or low income was termed as depression, and necessitated an urgent and aggressive treatment.

But this is not to imply that before the advent of the British, the Indian social structure was completely holistic, ensuring well-being of all.

### **The Indian Insane**

The word "pagal," the closest translation of the word "insane," is one of the most common words in usage: from pagalhaikya (are you mad?), pagalaadmi (insane man), saalapagal (the silly irrational person) to pagalpanti (ranging from crazy fun, fooling around to raving insanity). The connotations of the word range from silly, idiot, foolish, irrational, to downright delusional. It is expression to say "do you even know what you are talking about?" "do you have any idea what you are up to?" "do you have your head in the air?" But, the question to consider is who is the Indian Insane? Or more specifically, who is the contemporary Indian Insane?"

There is no one answer to this question in a society rife with multiplicity but not always tolerant to plurality. The idea of sanity in India directly affected by the dichotomy of good versus evil, right from the *Ramayana* in which Ravana was insane with pride, and the *Mahabharata*, in which Duryodhana driven insane by feelings of self-mortification. Compare this to the Aristotelian *Hamartia*, Lady Macbeth's guilt induced sleep-walking, and the



Faustian perdition as a consequence of *hubris*. Our sense of right / wrong, sorrow / delight, achievement / failure is determined by the cultural complexity and goes on to the formation or lack of righteousness versus guilt, contentment versus desire, and even our sense of entitlement versus gratitude.

In the complex Indian matrix, rural locations which once allowed slower pace of life and which accommodated and absorbed an individual's eccentricity within the familial unit, have now with increased and constant interactions with urban centres, shifted the benchmarks of an individual's expectations from self and from the society, and vice versa. Success, not just monetary success, but also large-scale recognition is becoming a parameter of life well lived, and above all, any eccentricity or excess which was seen as genius in Ghalib or likes, began to be seen as an illness. Saadat Hasan Manto, the revolutionary writer who chose Pakistan post partition, was incarcerated for his "insanity."

The cultural depiction of sanity also changed, and the healer-patient relationship came to be seen as dialectical in movies like *Khamoshi*, *Sadmaa*, etc. This was the time when India was waking up to modernity, and all psychological ailments came to be seen as products of an isolated modern life. Poets like Nissim Ezekiel, Dileep Chitre encapsulated this pathos in their poetry. Perhaps, the best representation of changing society could be seen in the advertising narratives, both print and audio-visual. The image of a woman from a perfect homemaker to a do-it-all superwoman, the young man from a simple middle class office going guy in Hamdard's Sinkara to a horse-riding mansion owner in so many (interestingly) pan masala adverts. The worst sufferers were perhaps the kids who in the 1980's got away with a simple "I am a Complan boy," or a simpler "uummmm," in the Colgate advertisement. But towards the turn of the millennium, the children were seen as far more ambitious, and certainly multitasking till extents that may seem impossible.

The yardsticks had become longer, much longer. Inactivity of any sort was depression, and a naughty (hyperactive) child had ADHD. The good old labels of naughty and quiet or reticent or even absent-minded were replaced by complicated diagnosis. In a considerable percentage of individuals, the psychological problems may be "real," leading to impaired thinking or even hallucinations. But still larger percentage is of the people sad or happy, excited or dull, enthusiastic or demotivated. A higher IQ may mean a greater propensity to question and analyse and to strive towards larger answers, while a creative mind would gravitate towards expression, especially novel ones.

### **Grey, Red, and Blue**

The human psyche is a complex interweaving of emotions, intuitions, conditioning, rules, and aspirations. What an individual expects from self is much dependent on what is expected from the individual within familial, social, and national circles. Insane as opposed to sane is a dichotomy wherein what is insane is determined by what is accepted as sane. One cannot argue that psychology as a behavioural and medical science is less than 150 years old. It began to understand the unconscious drives leading to anomalous behaviour. And so very often ends up justifying ranges of behaviour that are overtly violent, and categorizing the innocuous ones as dangerous. In a country like the USA, criminal psychology goes on to interpret destructive urges in terms of childhood abuse, dysfunctional family, social bullying etc. A case in point, once famous, National Football League player, Aaron Hernandez, then

24 was convicted for murder of Odin Lloyd and in the harrowing trial that attracted unprecedented media coverage, Hernandez was found guilty and sentenced to life. During this time, he also emerged as the prime suspect of a 2007 dual-killing in Florida. In the incident, three men walking on a side street were shot at by a passer-by, two died immediately, and the one who managed to escape uninjured, identified Hernandez as the shooter. Meanwhile, while serving his time, he was once again indicted for murder of two young immigrants from Cape Verde. The victim had accidentally spilled drink on Hernandez in a nightclub, and Hernandez followed them later in his car, and shot the two at the traffic signal. Although later acquitted for this double murder, Hernandez ended up committing suicide in his jail cell in 2017.

This instance does not aim to demonize Aaron Hernandez, far from it, instead it is cited here to consider two very dangerous aspects of contemporary thought. Critics and defenders alike continue to analyse the crime, but amidst all this Aaron Hernandez, the individual is lost. A detailed study of Hernandez's life has been broadcasted on Netflix, and it reveals the gory side of victory. As a sports-star, Hernandez was constantly under stress to perform. Any kind of physical pain was given no time for self-healing and players injected with quick-fixes. Further, the aggressive game also led to several head injuries, and any player suffering from repeated head injuries becomes susceptible to developing CET, a mental disorder in which a person is unable to manage intense emotions, especially anger and violence. Legally, Hernandez was a criminal, but was Hernandez insane? Was he completely isolated in his behaviour, or was he a victim of a larger social frenzy?

Now, let us consider another case, son of a former Indian National Congress, Manu Sharma shot and killed celebrity bartender, the model Jessica Lal at a high profile party in 1999 because Lal denied to serve an already inebriated Sharma another round of drinks for the bar had closed. Just as in the case of Hernandez where his celebrity status may have instilled in him a sense of power, in a country like India, power is in the hands of the rich, and even more than them, in the hands of the new "rajas," the politicians. Thus, Sharma was doubly intoxicated, and somehow secured under the knowledge that the gift of power received from his political family shall keep him insulated. Or the case of Rocky Yadav, a son of a Member of Legislative Assembly from Bihar, who killed a young aspiring student only because the young man had the nerve to overtake Yadav's speeding SUV. In both the cases justice was delivered, and today, locked in the country's most high-profile jail, the Tihar Jail, one can see a finally repentant Sharma humbled down. And one can hope that at least some sense of repentance will dawn on Yadav as well. Lounging in the jail, managing an occasional "VIP treatment," Yadav has been imprisoned by the power of public outcry in India at the turn of millennium, with media more powerful than ever, satellite channels having had made their way in every house, in each hamlet.

But both these cases are high profile ones and have managed to garner media attention. Now consider some cases that have been assigned anonymity, as if they have no face, no pain. The case of an Engineering student from Maharashtra, murdered by her own boyfriend, who was left to walk free due to "lack of evidence." Such cases are common and those that do get justice only far and in between.

But why should I be talking of “crime and punishment” when grappling with the issue of mental problems. Because this brings us to the point of incarceration, and who “needs” it versus who is free. The Foucauldian panopticon. The last case clearly exhibits the large-scale failure of a system. Of a criminal walking free. Is crime merely a state of mind? A construct? But, has the definition, the range, and the understanding of crime remained static across centuries? The very phrase “thumb-rule” comes from the fact that an eighteenth century judge, Sir Francis Buller conceded that it was okay to beat one’s wife until the beating stick was no thicker than one’s thumb. Would this still hold true in the society? The laws, the rules, the norms, all undergo change. Even globally, our definition of what is psychological illness has been redefined in its century and a half history. But before we grapple with what is mental illness, let’s consider a few cases to question what should be understood as mental illness.

The first is that of a 45 year old woman currently restrained at India’s one of the most conspicuous asylums in Agra. And the reason: her husband wants to remarry and wants nothing more to do with her. This incarceration is the most convenient way for him to get rid of her while she is confined to her bed, given routine doses and sometimes electric shocks as well. Yet another case is of a fifty year old small-town married woman with two grown up children, who is big treated for unmanageable anger. And the cause of anger: her husband’s extra marital affair with a cousin. Needless to say, this indignation and pain is not enough to justify her anger, and how strange it is that her husband is the one who takes her for routine check-ups, and remains unmoved by her plight, only retorting that she may give him divorce if she wants to. But for the woman who was married in the second year of her graduation, and has two adolescent kids, divorce seems unthinkable.

Or consider the case of Abu, a man in his thirties, dwelling on the footpaths as he has no place to go to. During the night he sleeps outside showroom shutters, and during the day he roams around in tatters, his torn clothes revealing more than they should, his hair full of lice and pasted with excreta of flies and insects. And should Abu manifest his anguish in any which way, even through a scream, he stands a fair chance of being hauled up by the cops, beaten, and then left again. This homeless lunatic has learned, despite his insanity, the benefits of silence.

The word asylum means “a place of refuge.” In case of those suffering from mental illness, the concept of mental asylums was introduced to India by the British. Prior to the arrival of the British, the mental patients were treated within the boundaries of house, family, and communities, and this perhaps was the beginning of alienation and dichotomization. Along came the stigma attached to a disease which was otherworldly.

The British chose to treat mental illness strictly along the lines of Enlightenment, while India, which had long been a refuge for saints and fakirs, mystics and healers, the *hakims* and the *vaidyas*, and where mental illness had never been strictly segregated, became a sort of dumping ground of ideas and techniques, ailments and treatments, and in the process, India lost track of who needed care and shelter and who needed autonomy, and the Pandora’s box that the issue of mental illness became, stuck out like a sore thumb.

## Ab Tumhaare Hawaale Vatan

The moment of Indian Independence was a moment of exhilaration, a moment long awaited, a moment long fought for, a moment well deserved. But even that moment of euphoria was fractured by the Partition. And suddenly, the Indian psyche which understood Indians versus the British as us versus them, had yet another “other,” and the already dissociated psyche now had many more intricacies to factor in.

Have we really stopped and considered that what we consider as psychological problems may actually be the product of intense emotional upheaval? That the psychological problems manifest the excesses of emotions and conflicts against a society in which those who don't fit are simply rejected. Two things are important to consider here: the mind and heart divide which emerged as the gift of Enlightenment to the world, wherein rationality and restraint were ideas that were most desirable. It is rather paradoxical that Buddha who taught the middle way had to take refuge in a forest for the level of his emotional sensitivity was incomprehensible to the society. And second is the role of art. That unconscious manifests itself in art was told to us quite categorically by the father of psychology more than a hundred years ago. However, while the art has remained same, the artist has changed. The shy, creative but the reticent member of the family, who really wasn't interested in the family gossip or even in trade, was happily assigned a corner in the house (or outhouse) where he / she could weave and spin or chisel and mould. The quintessential cottage industry. The handicraft. But today, artist is not the one who paints the best, but the one who sells the best, networks the best. The business-minded are artists and the artistic-minded simply lunatics.

Perhaps we can learn a lot from nature. A wounded animal in most cases, heals itself by licking its wounds. But sadly, society doesn't give most the chance to lick wounds, even the wounds that are mental and emotional than physical. This too has several reasons: need to keep moving on, remain productive and active, an increased pace of life, smaller family units, greater material desires, altered cultural motifs, and above all shifting value and belief systems.

## Strange Ideas from Strange Lands:

When India was waking up to Independence in 1947, Tennessee Williams' iconic *A Streetcar Named Desire* opened on Broadway on December 3, a story of a single woman in her thirties, too fierce to be subservient, but far too conditioned by an aristocratic upbringing to be totally independent, ends up with a mental breakdown involving psychosis. She is taken to the asylum while her happily married younger sister looks on, proud to be under an elusive stability with her abusive husband. Likewise, the 1962 novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey projects institutionalization of a man as a convenient escape from capital punishment.

It is interesting that before the advent and proliferation of the World Wide Web in India, the western ideas were in most cases restricted to the select few who visited foreign lands, or those who had NRI relatives visiting them. Excluded in this list are the absolutely top-notch businessmen, politicians, and even Bollywood celebrities, for they have always operated on a scale that is unimaginable to an average Indian, and so beyond reach that no one even bothered to aspire towards it.



On 15 August 1995, internet came to India. It was so befitting to have it inaugurate on the day of India's independence as internet has come to be the most powerful democratizing agent in our country. Information, entertainment, fashion, ideas, theories, songs, literature (the list goes on), nothing remained beyond reach. For example, the latest trends no longer took five years to travel from Italy's Milan to India via Soho, Manhattan; it was just a click away. Thereafter, the nation's largest business conglomerate, Reliance Industries entered the mobile-network market in 2002 with the aim to bring the world within the grasp of every Indian: "*kar lo duniya mutthi mein*," roughly translated as "grab the world with your hands."

This changed the Indian psyche forever. Internet meant exposure to the world out there: exposure to trends, ideas, knowledge, recipes, and even latest cars; the last being absolutely accessible (if one's pocket allowed) with the liberalization of the economy and opening of the Foreign Direct Investment in India. And India got its range of benchmarks: Kashmira Shah to Malaika Arora to Elizabeth Hurley; or Indira Gandhi to Margaret Thatcher to Oprah Winfrey; *Banegi Apni Baat* to *Beverly Hills 90210* to *American Pie*; from the Tatas and the Ambanis to Bill Gates and Warren Buffet to Jack Ma; from Shobha De to Daniel Steel to Salman Rushdie . . . the list of metaphors can only be replaced by yet another metaphor: "an endless scroll"!

The sane Indian now needed to be hardworking, glamorous, impeccably dressed, alongside being the cynosure of any party and an inspiration to all. The advertisements of men's products or of women's portrayed them as superpeople. The best parent, the best buddy, and best at being everything and anything else! And as a result, underperformance in school became a disorder, overeating or eating too little, with fancy names like anorexia bulimia, etc. Perhaps the worst sufferers were women who were now to juggle both job and family, and absence of either was a terrible lack! In fact, such lacks went on to mar the wholeness of your self, as if not wanting to pursue a career or not being overtly loving towards your child was some sort of a disease, and in the latter case, perhaps even demonic.

The Indian ideals have continued to changed, and the human efforts to live up to those ideals have become more aggressive than ever, while the labels for the so-called outcasts more rigid. But then, this doesn't stop here.

### **Holier than Thou**

The 1960's, the decade known in the West for its hippie movement and flower children, saw emergence of cult worship, little utopian communities claiming to be governed by no governance, i.e., an egalitarian system where love and peace prevailed, where a self-proclaimed guru whispered a mantra or two in the ears of the followers, and their lives were changed forever. A segment of Indian society woke up to this dream in the 1970's. This segment comprised predominantly of Bollywood celebrities, some like Vinod Khanna who had left his career at its peak to find peace in the Pune ashram of Osho, while others like Kabir Bedi who had failed to garner adequate success and whose ideas were too progressive, sometimes erratic and controversial, found solace in the lavish greens of the sprawling ashram. This was a time when high-brow spirituality was looked upon at with suspicion. And the average Indian was happily unburdened by yet another "to-do." And it was during this time that for an average Indian, spirituality was strictly restricted to the last quarter of one's life, after all the responsibilities had been fulfilled, and all pleasures partaken. And anyone who dared to break this order was either a loser or an escapist, but certainly not spiritual, at

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least not till you were as popular as Maharishi Yogi, or Neem Kiroli Baba. No, spirituality was a strict no for an average Indian. Certainly some kind of mental affliction, an anomaly.

But in the country of such fan following, people catch up with Bollywood, or Bollywood catches up with people, whatever the case may be. And come eighties, and spirituality was knocking at each door: there was a MurariBapu or a Kirit Bhai or a Brahmakumari Sister, etc. And spirituality became the next essential feather in the cap. Suddenly it was okay to muse upon *Gita* and *Gita Govinda* without being labelled a weirdo. But, what goes down, also goes up, very up.

For next we knew, the whole concept of seeking God or seeking solace became extremely glamorous, and I dare say, “a status symbol.” Following a Guru or an organization: Sri Sri Ravishankar, Jaggi Vasudeva, MurariBapu, ISKCON, etc. became a matter of prestige. But in this roller coaster ride of new-age peace-finding, what went up, also came crashing down: with sex scandals, scandals involving money laundering and even murder! The average Indian had a new villain. And a new abnormality too: overdependence on self-proclaimed godmen.

### Conclusion

This is more or less where things stand today where we struggle between religion and scandal, altruism and limelight, between narratives that tell us to follow our passion to the ground reality where survival itself is often a struggle. Blurring the lines between reality and make believe are the self-touting reality shows that claim to give platform to budding talents, young school children who sacrifice an entire academic year in for the sake of “fifteen minutes of fame,” only to be lost in oblivion the following year.

On a mind fed as much on Napoleon Hill and Paulo Coelho as Shiva Khera and Devdutt Pattanaik, in the country of unity in diversity, a quintessential Indian mind stands divided and often lost in the maze of motifs that are too enchanting to be ignored, and yet too beguiling to adequately represent reality for the major portion of Indian population.

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