

RELIGION, POLITICS AND GOD MEN

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ABSTRACT

Last few years has witnessed a rise of a variety of God men with vast followers. Most of them talk in the language of spirituality, ignoring the issues of average people. In history we see that on one hand there are clerics, priests, maulanans, acharyas who had been associates of the landlord-kings and gave legitimacy to the rule, oppression and exploitation of the ruling classes. The saints talked the language, which related to the problems and travails of the people. These saints cut across religious lines – bhakti, sufi and liberation theology in particular. Many religions like Sikhism began as the syncretic traditions.

Today we see a plethora of godmen who have mushroomed along with increase in religiosity all around. The rise in the impact of identity politics and mushrooming of God men has been running in a parallel fashion, one does not see too many saints articulating the problems of poor people today. These God men talk in a mystical language and propound some of the conservative values while keeping quiet about the social ills prevailing in the name of religions.

While these God men have increased in number, topics related to religion and God men cannot be easily brought under the scrutiny of reason. Today innumerable social phenomenon have thrived which derive their name from religion. The whole politics, global as well as local, is wearing the garb of religiosity. Even in earlier times the clergy and saints were the two faces and two sides of the phenomenon of religion – the former relates to power while the later relates to power-less. Today the contrast is more visible but more complex than before. This paper probes these aspects of the Indian society.

Keywords: ***Religion, Secularism, Politics, God men, Sufi tradition***

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The Politics Today

The social-political scene in India during the last three decades witnessed one or the other political issue, which has its base in the religions. Religious conversions, Shahbano case, Ram temple movement, Babri mosque demolition, and 'Islamic terrorism' present a picture of India, which is much different than the one seen in the earlier decades of the republic. This scene is duly backed up by the rise of religiosity in different walks of life. The religious cults, Asaram Bapu, Aniruddha Bapu, Pandurang Shastri Athwale and their ilk are drawing large followers. The temple visits and temple functions have become the major events of communities. The media is devoting more and more space on the discourses of swamis and saints, columns on religious values and religious functions are plenty in the media.

Television serials depict the 'guiding role' of clergy and there are special channels like Astha and Sanskar to propagate particular versions of religiosity. The struggling middle class hero of the previous decades is replaced by the stinking rich patriarch constantly in touch with the priest for guidance in his regular affairs. 'Current events in India reveal the continuing importance of religious nationalism...the religious aspects of Indian Nationalism have yet to receive adequate attention' (Veer 1998).

Religion: Mirror of Society

Religion being a total mirror of society has multiple facets, which are complexly interwoven but diverse. On one side we have the facts, which have more to do with belief in supernatural, holy books, and rituals, places of worship and places of pilgrimage. All these are well articulated by the clergy, official or de facto of that religion.

These have more to do with identity aspects. As such understanding of religion fluctuates between religious identities and religious communities on one hand to the moral values of the religions on the other. Somewhere the role of clergy, with different prefixes like Acharya, Mahant, Guru, has always been a dominant one. Their social power has also risen along with rise of religious cults and their followers amongst diverse sections of society.

Moral aspects of religions like love, non-violence, dignity, tolerance, truth, justice and peace have a great deal of overlap. The saints, the one's who were with the average people of society do act as vehicles of this aspect of religion, in different forms like Bhakti saints in Hinduism, Sufi saints in Islam and liberation theologian in Christianity.

Clergy and Saints

Of all the aspects of religion the role and power of the clergy has been most striking. In societies where agricultural mode of production led to the rise of

feudal classes and Kingdoms, the clergy played a role of defender of the system of exploitation based on the feudal relations of production.

The association of clergy with the feudal lords in different settings has been the hallmark of feudal power structure. Here the expressions are different. The structure of clerical organisation also remains diverse. In Christianity one sees the most organised Church standing in close relation to the power of Kings. In Hinduism, the King had *Rajgurus* (Royal Priests) and the landlords had the blessings of the local priests.

‘The opposition to clerical power in Europe took the form of mysticism, open heresy, or armed insurrection, all depending on the conditions of time. Sixteenth century reforms heavily leaned on mysticism, this, was directed against the clergy whose wealth and political power it affected’ (Mehta 1998A). The revolts of poor peasants took the form of deriving the strength from pre-hierarchical Christian society and medieval mysticism. This was as opposed to the power of Church, which was oppressive to poor peasants. Munzer deriving values from mysticism led the poor peasants and attacked the hierarchic church structure. He repudiated the concept of Bible being the only and infallible revelation. The role of Saints vis a vis clergy is manifested in different forms; there is no universal pattern in this. The opposition to exploitative systems also assumed the forms in a religious language, ‘Revolutionary opposition to feudalism lasted throughout the middle ages. It took the form of mysticism, open heresy or armed insurrection, all depending on the conditions of the time. As for mysticism it is well known how much sixteenth century reformers depended on it. Munzer himself was largely indebted to it’ (Engels 1850; Marx and Engels: 1982).

The oppressed masses found their pain and sorrows addressed in a sympathetic way, which acted as a sort of healing balm by set of people who were saints. ‘The impoverished masses who in the earlier phase of civilisation were simply slaves and who in the advanced phase, became the property-less working class were henceforth confronted with a dual uncertainty and dual misery; those coming from still uncontrolled nature and those coming from the exploitative machinery of ruling class...This made the life of masses too painful; full of suffering and uncertainty to be born without any palliative remedy, this was supplied by religion-the belief in God who alone could assure justice, if not right now at least sometime later, if not in this world at least in the afterworld’ (Chattopadhyay 1987). Religion on one hand had this role of offering a solace to the deprived sections. It is the saints who at a positive note offered solace to the deprived. The saints in a way challenged the power of clergy. But this challenge was always articulated in a very positive language. They were critical of the established norms of religion at the same time they evolved their own spiritual language, which while totally opposed to the one of institutional religion did create a bond of harmony amongst the poorer

sections. Traditions like Lokayat, which again were away from the dynamics of social power opposed the caste system, opposed the concepts of heaven and hell and the blind faith constructed by Brahminism. This blind faith was the instrument through which the dominant classes, feudal lords, were exploiting the poor. Lokayat called for resorting to reason.

Mostly Saints did not practice rituals. They did not confine just to religious scriptures or invoked any of the established traditions. Their concept of God or Super Natural power is that of a friend who is not much to be feared as projected in the tradition of clerics. Thus two parallel traditions kept running in the name of religion, the one of clergy and the other of saints. The clergy is with the oppressors and saints with the toiling masses. To the extent that the subjugated and oppressed class is able to resist the dominance of their oppressors, their ideological hegemony and are able to pose a serious challenge to oppressive religious doctrines, the oppressed can insulate their beliefs which later continue to symbolise defiance...The philosophy of Charvak, Siddha, Nath Tantra ran parallel religious traditions to the Brahminical religion, more popular amongst the oppressed, right upto Bhakti movement. Interestingly in the due course many of these traditions themselves are co-opted again by the elite religious traditions. Sai Baba who was a Muslim Sufi, with followers amongst both religions, has currently been appropriated by the Brahminised. Lord Jagganath of Odisha was worshipped by Advaitis but now it has become the God of dominant class and castes.

India: Bhakti and Sufi traditions

In India the major Saint traditions have been Bhakti and Sufi. Both come from different religious streams has had a strong impact on Indian masses. Bhakti is probably the outstanding example of the subaltern trend in Indian religious history. Bhakti movement began in Tamilnadu and spread northwards. The Bhakti saints came from different streams and there is plethora of saints coming from low caste. Bhakti 'opposed the institutionalisation of religion, tried to decentralise it, and declared that it is a private matter. It gave respectability to the separation of state power and religion and merged the concept of God worship with the process of getting knowledge' (Bhadu 2003: 33). Warkari tradition in Maharashtra is one important trend of this. Chokhamela a poet saint coming from low caste, articulates the sorrow of poor in his poems. Reprimanding God for the condition of the society where there is such huge inequality complains to him about his world system for its cruelty to the poor. The devotion in this trend is away from Vedic rituals and it's teaching is away from the Vedas and Upanishads. Chokhamela in one of his Abhang, folk form of poetry, says, 'We have not read the Holy tomes, we are not experts in the interpretation of Vedant-Dharma but the core of religious teachings, the formless god is standing for us in the form of Vithoba. (God standing on the brick) and so is accessible to us.'

Tukaram is one of the most popular saints of Maharashtra. 'His literature is free from the Sanskrit rich Brahminical literature, which keeps the average reader at distance. Free from Brahminical elitism, Tukaram's literature has a force to assess the world from humanistic angle. The deep sympathies which his literature displays for the poor, contributes to enhancing his literary prestige' (Nemade 1983: 9). Travails of poor people are the focus of his work. This Bhakti based tradition gave respectability to many low castes and also to Muslims. And thereby it was able to pose a challenge to Brahmanism.

Bhakti tradition had specific features. These were to oppose the hegemony of Brahminism, opposed the rituals, and opposed the Vedic Monopoly of educated elite of society. They uniformly opposed Sanskrit and adopted the languages more popular with the masses. Also they opposed the prevalent polytheism and talked of one God. In India in particular Hindu Muslim unity has been one of the concerns expressed by most of the saints. Tukaram's literature shows that 'there was prevalence of blind faith and rational thought was rejected by the dominant streams of society. Brahmins had a total hegemony on the faith, worship and knowledge...Bhakti tradition (Nath, Mahanubhav, Gosavi, Warkari and Dattasampradayi) saints challenged and opposed this Brahminical exploitation.

The inequality in the field of spiritual attainments, which were opposed to the Shudras and women, had religious sanctions. Brahmins had vested interests in maintaining their own monopoly in religious arena...These Brahmins had no problem in serving loyally the Muslim rulers as Diwan, Deshpande and Kulkarni' (Nemade 1983: 18). In a way the streams of Bahkti were not merely religious movements. They were targeted at the social evils and opposed the landlord Brahmin alliance. They propagated social equality and brotherhood.

Sufi saints also played similar role in the social sphere. They opposed the tyranny of the powerful and projected the popular elements of religion. Breaking the barriers of social inequality they also united the people and struggled against the prevalent orthodoxy, and blind faith. Their followers came from the lower strata of society, irrespective of the religion of the people. All for the humanistic preaching revered Miyan Mir, Baba Farid, Gesudraj, Sheikh Salim Chishti and Nizamuddin Auliya.

The Brahminical stream had its grip on the whole society, fully backed by those in power. This had its expression in the Vedic Rituals. In contrast the subaltern Bhakti, developed its own forms of worship away from the Brahminic norms. Thapar (2002:318) notes, 'the reduction in the emphasis on priest compared to his role in the sacrificial ritual of Vedic Brahm[i]nism gradually led to devotional worship-bhakti-becoming most widespread form of puranic religion. The Vedic religion had well-defined rituals and was exclusive to the upper castes. The Puranic religion had a far wider appeal.' She goes on to note that bhakti tradition manifested in India in diverse forms, 'as a

broad based tradition...for the majority religion (Bhakti) remained an area of interplay, accommodation and contestation of a localised kind...' (Thapar 2002: 351)

Bhakti movement gave hope and awakening to the people. The section oppressed by the spiritual tyranny of the Brahmins got a feeling of their worth in the society. This movement rejected the *devbhasha* (language of gods) Sanskrit and used the languages popular in the masses, like Marathi in Maharashtra. Avadhi in UP. It came as a whiff of air liberating the people from the stranglehold of Brahminism. The rise of Bhakti movement was a rebellion against the idol worship, the oppression of caste system getting manifested through the rigid rituals. These movements were opposed to the Vedantist concept of Sanyas, which involves no work. They bridged the gap between Hindus and Muslims. These also had very progressive attitudes on most of the matters related to the position of women in society.

The scholars of Syncretism have pointed out that many subaltern traditions defy the rigid classification into Hindu or Muslim in the continent, so thoroughly intermixed they are in their social expression. The ordinary people have imbibed the prevalent traditions irrespective of their source, so far as they appeal to them in a spiritual and social way. 'Scores of communities scattered across this vast subcontinent still refuse to be neatly categorised as "Hindu" or "Muslim" or whatever, freely borrowing from diverse traditions to create their own way of understanding the world' (Sikand 2003: 3).

Kabir and Nanak

Kabir and Nanak stand tall as those challenging the authority of the clergy and in turn those in power. Their attempts to explore the religious language which can express the woes of the masses led them away from the power centered Brahmins and Mullahs. Kabir the medieval saint developed the set of values, which were against the domination of elite and tried to unite the people cutting across both the religions. He denounced caste system and was against untouchability in particular. 'He upheld fundamental unity of man, and was opposed to all kinds of discrimination between human beings, whether on the basis of caste, religion, race, family or wealth. His sympathies were with the poor man with whom he identified himself' (Chandra 1990: 127).

Nanak had a mystic bent of mind and he composed verses and sang them with the accompaniment of rabab, a string instrument played by his follower Mardan. He visited Mecca, Medina, Sri Lanka and other places searching for knowledge, like Kabir he also denounced the rituals, idol worship and formal observances. He aimed at bridging distinctions between the Hindus and the Muslims, in order to create an atmosphere of peace, goodwill and mutual interaction. 'Nanak and Kabir both insisted that they were neither Hindu nor Muslim, along with other similar iconoclasts, and defied the might of

Brahmans and Mullahs' (Sikand 2003: 9). The followers of both these major saints of Indian tradition were more amongst the poor and oppressed sections of society. The story of Nanak in which he preferred to have meals at the house of a weaver Bhago, in preference to accepting the hospitality of the landlord is fairly symbolic of their social affiliation. The story in a symbolic way shows Nanak's opposition to the landlords as their income is laced with the blood of oppressed.

The Sufi tradition is basically derived from the teachings of Islam. The Sufis have a mystical bent of mind and they were having a deep devotion to spiritualism. They were disgusted by the vulgar display of wealth and power. Hence they kept aloof from the state. There were many similarities between the ideas of Sufi saints and Hindu Bhakti saints. They chose the Hindavi or Hindi language to converse with the people and many of their verses are composed in Hindi.

Current Times

In India alone if we see, there are plethora of God men, who are a category of their own. They come from the parallel authority structure of clergy and built their own followers while reiterating status quo of the clergy. The unique features of these God men, their novelty in picking up some issues, which may appeal to large section, be it spiritual, be it profane, from addressing the stress of present society, to the habits of addiction. What unites them is their huge estates and plush material gains in the process, their silence on social ills and their ignorance on the material issues of the poor. In today's context they will not talk of evils of caste, dowry and female infanticide, instead they will talk about peace of mind and need to be calm.

This new set of Gurus and Acharyas, Sri Sri Ravishankar, Asaram Bapu, Pandurang Shastri Athwale, Sudhanshu Mahraj, Aniruddh Bapu, Narayan Maharaj and the likes, are the nerve soothers for the existential tensions of the middle class, and upholders of status quo of caste and gender. These Gurus are pushing the Manusmirit and the feudal values of caste and gender hierarchies in a new language, the language laced with modernity, so to say. Similarly one notices the presence of Muslim Olama, Mullahs and the likes of Shahi Imam who have been promoting obscurantism in the Muslim community. Starting from their role in putting pressure to reverse the Shah Bano judgment to their opposition to abolition of triple talaq and polygamy amongst Muslims, their retrograde role is a bane of Muslim community in India. Deriving from Christian tradition, Benny Hinn has been doing public hypnosis exercise to cure diseases; Ramdeo Baba has a more permanent set up and strong rooting in the elite of the society. I would take two typical cases of God men for our understanding.

Shankaracharya

Shankracharya Jayendra Saraswati, the pontiff of Kanchi Kamkoti Peetham, was arrested as the main accused in the murder of a Shankar Raman, a manager in the *math* (place of the holy seer) came as a big surprise to many. He was the one who was in the media for his role in the resolution of Babri masjid dispute. While many observers said that it is a police case and should be dealt like that, Vishwa Hindu Parishad went hammer and tongs against the Government. Also that it is a humiliation to the Hindu society and in retaliation they will protest and the ministers will not be blessed in the Hindu temples for the next day. He also threatened to launch an agitation against the arrest of Holy seer. Mr. Modi the then Chief Minister of Gujarat talked to the Prime minister saying that Government should think of the sentiments of the people before arresting such holy people.

One is not sure as to how much religious followers does Shankracharya have amongst the Hindus. It seems it is only amongst a section of Hindu. Does he represent the Hindus of the country? Surely this is not an elected post and it is through the inheritance of the *Maths* that the likes of him come to occupy these seats of power and prestige. The views of Shakaracharya about Dalits and women may not be heartening to them and to large section of India's Hindus. Talking of such *maths* these are the places dime a dozen, though Shakaracharya does have an exalted position amongst that. This *maths* have great amount of wealth, which comes through donations of the people. Since most of the chiefs of these *maths* are bachelors, many a times there is a power struggle after the demise of the chiefs and in that there are serious clashes and crimes. This is a whole world by itself full of all the dimensions of human life, quest for power, jealousy, money and all that. But of course all this is in the name of religion.

Baba Ramdeo

It is not for the first time that the followers of God-men rampaged when their Guru was asked questions or doubts on the grounds of laws of the land. Brinda Karat, Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI (M)] leader and MP pointed out that the medicines produced in Ramdeo's factory in Haridwar contained animal and human parts. She stated this on the basis of the version of the workers sacked from the factory. In response hell was let loose and the supporters of Ramdeo attacked the office of CPI (M) leading to the skirmish between the followers of CPI (M) and Ramdeo.

Ramdeo said that CPI (M) is not nationalist, that it is a ploy of multinationals and that he is being defamed. His strong support came from the Sangh Parivar followers, the hooligans of Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Bajarang Dal. They joined the attack on the office of CPI (M), while the BJP leaders came out strongly to condemn CPI (M) for its insult of India's culture. One of them went

to the extent of saying that whenever Indian (read Brahminic Hinduism) culture is gaining prominence CPI (M) feels threatened. Many leaders from other parties kept quiet or 'supported' Ramdeo.

The story, which has been undermined in the din of hysteria, began with factory owned by Ramdeo where many a women employees were exploited heavily and 133 women were sacked for demanding the implementation of work norms in the factory. That's how Brinda Karat, who wanted to defend the rights of women employees, got to know about the factory and got the samples analysed. She as a citizen and as a Member of Parliament (MP) raised the issue. According the prevalent laws the Ayurvedic medicines cannot put any human or animal extract in the medicines. The basic issue of workers right and the ethics of production of Ayurvedic medicines both have been swamped by the emotions roused because the owner of the factory has the halo of a God-man, conducting shows of Yoga on TV. With the BJP led NDA being in the seat of power, Ramdev has taken a high leap into business of food products and ayurvedic medicines.

Contemporary Babas

The cover of Baba-dom is the best to hide the things or to avoid following the laws relating to business and industry. It is not too far back in the time that one Narendra Maharaj was not allowed to violate the norms of security of air travel, as he was prevented from carrying his dandam (Holy staff) along with him while traveling. The whole hell was let loose; his followers were on the streets, rampage and the usual venting of ire. It is touted that the God-men teach religious values of tolerance, peace and non violence! Most of the occasions these followers go on rampage when their Guru is not allowed to flout the laws with impunity, or an uncomfortable question is raised about their activities. It is no different in other religions. Once Asghar Ali Engineer, human rights activist of great repute, questioned the delay in the flight due to late coming of Bohra High Priest Syedna, this mild questioning was followed by ransacking of his house and office and he himself was beaten up mercilessly.

While nobody in the political circles is picking up courage to raise the question regarding Ramdeo, one can presume that those in the electoral politics believe that there are two sets of laws, one for the ordinary mortals and another for the 'divinely ordained'. The association of saffron God-men with Hindu right is close and overt/subtle, both at the same time. Recently Ramdeo attended the annual convention of Rashtra Sevika Samiti a subordinate organisation of RSS (incidentally RSS does not permit women to be its members). When Shankaracharya was arrested in the Shankar Raman murder case, Vajpayee and Aasaram Bapu rubbed shoulders, to protest against the arrest of the 'holy

seer'. The argument put forward was that Shankaracharya represents Hindus and is revered by Hindus, so he should be treated differently.

God men

One has some general observations about the God-men. During last several years they have been flourishing at exponential rate. Most of them have done very well by the profane standards of accumulation of wealth, chain of plush Ashrams, lakhs of devotees, infinite money, foreign junkets and all the luxuries possible. You renounce the world to get the best of it! Their prefixes also are very diverse and keep on getting better and better with time. They do choose their prefixes and suffixes. While other God men do it in their own way, Rajneesh had an interesting trajectory of these. He began as Acharya, went on to become Bhagwan (God!) and finally gave himself the title of Osho before he left this planet. All of them have different strengths (weaknesses), someone is more for diamonds, someone likes cars and expensive clothes and yet another one prefers videos of dubious distinction.

While many other politicians are bowing to the popular pressure and defending Ramdev, Sangh Parivar regards them as the representatives of Hindu culture. What is Hindu about their culture needs another investigation. One has seen the life of Buddha, Kabir, Nanak and Gandhi who lived on little means and all simplicity. Buddha in fact renounced his palace to take to jungle and merge with all and sundry in their deprivations. The many from the current genre, which in fact is a blot on the humane traditions of saints, are also close to centers of power, Dharendra Brahmachari, Satya Sai Baba, Chandraswami and Jayendra Saraswati being some notorious examples.

Ayurveda is being linked to Indian Traditions. As such the development of the Ayurveda was halted, mainly by Brahminical dictates. Ayurveda has lot of elements, which can be put on the scientific foundations to make it more suitable to the human kind. The proper research where critical reason is employed to make it better is not employed in the Ayurveda as it is strongly linked to faith. No doubt multinationals may have their own axe to grind in the whole story, but we need to look at the proper investigation of facts and laws before the medicines produced by any Baba, Acharya and Mahant, can be put to public use. Karat has just raised a simple question, why Ramdeo's factory violates the laws of the land? It is a simple matter to investigate and set right. But since here the factory owner has hallows of God-man, radiating in the reflected glory of God almighty how dare we the mortal raise such questions.

The God-men are above the law is the premise of their followers and supporters, whoever they be! So in a single stroke Brinda Karat and her party

are dubbed anti Hindu (Anti National, against Hindu Nation) so how is nationalism defined? If you blindly submit to the self-proclaimed God-men, you are a nationalist else! Is one against the indigenous system of practices? No way. The only demand is for ethical and rational implementation of the therapies to avoid any one coming up and putting in market some medicines or methods that can be injurious to the health. Social scrutiny of anything and everything is called for. The cloak of Holiness does not exempt one from the laws of the land and being subject to the critical questioning of peers and others from raising questions about the composition and techniques being put forward. The claims related to the efficacy of the medicines and techniques have to be evaluated on the basis of the criterion already developed by rational techniques. Subjecting traditional systems to these rigorous methods will only make them more effective, meaningful like the pruning out of grain from the chaff. It will make them above the subjective claims of those promoting it.

If Ramdev had done no wrong, then why was the emotional outburst? Why was Karat labeled anti National against? If he had things to hide, then the angry outburst is understandable, as it will harm the proliferating business built up with a meticulous mix of some knowledge sprinkled with generous helping of emotions and faith. Such outbursts are wonderful smokescreen for hiding one's wrongs. This 'faith' can surely act as opium, the frenzied followers of Baba's rampaging shows that time and over again!

Saints

The increase in religiosity and the prominence of these God men is running hand in hand with an elevation of religion-based politics. Many of them are supporters of VHP and others have their own agenda in strengthening the traditional Hindu social order. Some of them are working in tandem with RSS's Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, Lakkhanand Saraswati (Odisha) Aseemananad (Dangs, Gujarat) and the followers of Asaram Bapu in Jhabua area (Madhya Pradesh). Recently Narayan Maharaj came in support of VHP and organised the *ghar vapasi* (return home, a euphemism for reconversion to Hinduism of those who have once converted as Christians) of Adivasis.

None of them talks of social ills, and it seems most of these are the religious platform for the politics of RSS and its offshoots. Assumingly the *babadom* gives them a halo and immunity from the rules of the land. They are the religious face of the politics of Hindu right.

Conclusion

More work needs to be done to draw out the deeper connection between global economic and political changes, the rise of deprivation and aggravation of worldly problems during last few decades and the rising clout of God men. How these God men play a role in neutralising the people's dissatisfaction and help in perpetuation of status quo is an interesting exercise to grapple with. Why the problems of deprived people do not finding expression in the language of religion, as in medieval times, is a matter of great concern and investigation. While one does not subscribe to the conspiracy theory of conscious planning, there is a deeper connection between unjust economic system and its beneficiaries encouraging such trends. This seems to be little bit obvious. Why the other less privileged fall into this addiction of God men's tricks is another fascinating aspect of the whole phenomenon.

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