Judgment day

Asaram's rise and fall is reflective of the lives of
some self-styled godmen of our times

**I**n sentencing Asaram Bapu to imprisonment for the rest of his natural life for the rape of a 16-year-old girl in 2013, a Special Court in Jodhpur has reinvigorated faith in the criminal justice system. Two aides who facil­itated the crime have been sentenced to 20 years in pri­son. At a time when sexual offences against women and minor girls are being reported with benumbing regular­ity, a verdict of this sort reinforces public trust. Holding powerful and influential heads of religious institutions is not easy in this country, given the wide public sup­port and political patronage they enjoy. Fortunately, neither the investigators nor the prosecutors in the case of the 77-year-old Asumal Harpalani, who named him­self Asaram, seem to have been overawed by his large following or intimidated by his belligerent supporters. High-ranking police officers received letters and phone calls threatening them and their families with dire con­sequences, and witnesses were killed or attacked in the course of the investigation and trial. Against this back­drop, it took courage and determination for the victim and her family to seek justice. The facts are chilling. The victim's parents, who were Asaram's devotees, were asked to take her from the ashram's residential school at Chhindwara to the godman's home in Manai, near Jodhpur, ostensibly to exorcise ‘evil spirits' that had possessed her. The parents were asked to leave, and the girl had to be alone with him. She was sexually assault­ed and threatened against speaking out. Fortunately, her father managed to get a police complaint registered in New Delhi. It was later transferred to Jodhpur.

It is also a sign of the times that every time the final verdict is set to be delivered in a criminal case involving a self-styled godman, the State concerned has to be on high alert and massive police deployment is required to quell possible trouble by followers. After the violence and mayhem that gripped Panchkula town in the imme­diate aftermath of the sentencing of Gurmeet Ram Ra­him Singh last year in a rape case, this time the police took no chances, and the judgment was delivered in a makeshift courtroom in a prison. There is nothing more mortifying to the devout than witnessing jet-age god- men betraying the trust of their followers. Asaram fits into the template of the self-styled godman: graduating from running a liquor business to peddling spiritual succour, leading a lavish lifestyle, expanding into busi­ness and enjoying the patronage of the rich and power­ful, and, ultimately, misusing his power to exploit his unquestioning devotees. Special Judge Madhusudan Sharma has underscored how the accused had broken the victim's trust in him. Verdicts such as these are needed at a time when sections of society see tainted men as guardians of India's age-old spiritual tradition.

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1. [**imprisonment**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/imprisonment) (noun) – incarceration, internment, captivity.
2. [**reinvigorate**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/reinvigorate) (verb) – re-energize, fortify, strengthen/resuscitate
3. [**aide**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/aide) (noun) – assistant, helper, subordinate.
4. [**facilitate**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/facilitate) (verb) – assist, help, aid.
5. [**benumbing**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/benumb) (adjective) –  insensible, unfeeling, numbed.
6. [**patronage**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/patronage) (noun) – assistance, support, backing.
7. [**overawe**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/overawe) (verb) – intimidate, unnerve/frighten, discourage.
8. [**belligerent**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/belligerent) (adjective) – aggressive, threatening, antagonistic.
9. [**dire**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/dire) (adjective) – terrible/horrible, dreadful, frightful.
10. [**chilling**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/chill) (adjective) – frightening, terrifying, disturbing/horrifying.
11. [**ostensibly**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/ostensibly) (adverb) – apparently, seemingly, allegedly.
12. [**exorcise**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/exorcise) (verb) – drive out, expel, rid/ free (evil spirits (ghosts)).
13. [**quell**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/quell) (verb) – put an end to, get rid of, curb/thwart.
14. [**mayhem**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/mayhem) (noun) – chaos, disorder, turmoil/unrest.
15. [**grip**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/grip) (verb) – afflict, affect, torment.
16. [**aftermath**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/aftermath) (noun) – consequences, outcome/results, repercussions/reverberations.
17. [**makeshift**](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/makeshift?q=makeshift+) (adjective) – temporary, make-do, provisional/substitute.
18. [**mortifying**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/mortifying) (adjective) – causing great embarrassment.
19. [**the devout**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/devout) (noun) – dedication/devotion, commitment, loyalty.
20. [**jet-age**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/jet_age) (adjective) – relating to the era of traveling by aircraft.
21. [**betray**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/betray) (verb) – be unfaithful to, be disloyal to, break the trust in.
22. [**graduate**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/graduate) (verb) – develop, progress, move up.
23. [**peddling**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/peddling) (noun) – an act of promoting an idea extensively.
24. [**succour**](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/succour?q=Succour) (noun) – aid/help/support, assistance, relief.
25. [**underscore**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/underscore) (verb) – underline, emphasize, highlight.
26. [**tainted**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/taint) (adjective) – dishonoured/disgraced, corrupt, dirty.