Sambhavi Gudi Iona, Badi Iona?

Should 7 yr old Sambhavi be in a School or in a Temple?

Story of a sensational Humanist Campaign against the Religious Exploitation of a Child

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Dalai Lama and Sambhavi

The Humanist Poster and Poser

Sambhavi’s Caretaker Usha Rani

Editor A.B.K. Prasad, Feminists Volga, Satyavati; Children’s activists Achyut Rao & Prabhakar Sastry

Humanists on TV: T.V. Rao, Novelist Chandra Latha, Kotapati Murahari Rao, Prof. Sinha

Special TV Programs: Lawyer Madhusudan, Activist Rajendra Prasad, News Coverage, Eenadu’s Tirupataiah

Ramabrahmam, KCR Reddy, RDO Nandyal, Madhusudan & Suresh Kumar, Hindu groups, SFI activists’ arrest

Babu Gogineni who initiated the public campaign in collaboration with a host of intellectuals and activists.
For the last few weeks Humanists, Rationalists and Human Rights activists have been waging a huge battle against the forces of fundamentalism in Andhra Pradesh. This is a battle where all sections of society, and in which the media, the police, the justice system, aggressive fundamentalists, the Dalai Lama as well as the Humanists and Rationalists are involved. It is a battle that is being watched with keen interest by millions of homes as it unfolds on live TV and through public discussions, newspaper articles and also in homes.

The campaign started publicly with a complaint made by Babu Gogineni in the name of IHEU along with a dozen collaborating intellectuals and organisations with the Andhra Pradesh Human Rights Commission. The campaign’s slogan Sambhavi Gudilona Badilona? has now become the byword for TV programs, for newspaper articles and also discussions as all citizens are challenged to take a stand whether Sambhavi, a child of 7, who it is claimed is a reincarnation of a Buddhist goddess should be in school or remain in the temple. Everyone has an opinion, most of them agreeing with the Humanists.

This is also a story which has catapulted Humanists and Rationalists into the limelight as superstition, religious privilege and human rights clash publicly in Andhra Pradesh state which is home to 90 million Telugu speaking people - the second largest language group in India.

**Story of a Humanist Campaign Against Religious Exploitation of a Child**

*Babu Gogineni*

**How the fraud became public**

It was on the lazy Sunday morning of 16 August that all hell broke loose. There were urgent and breathless phone calls from HM TV, Mahaa TV, INews and Studio N TV Channels asking me if I had heard of Sambhavi.

“Please switch on your TV sir – Sambhavi, a child of 7, is claiming to be the reincarnation of a childhood friend of the Dalai Lama. She speaks with great clarity and precision. She claims Tibet will be free in 2010, that there would be a great event in 2012, and that the Dalai Lama would visit her soon in Surya Nandi temple in Kurnool District. It seems the child is in touch with the Buddhist leader by telepathy. Sambhavi is also saying that the Telugu Soothsayer of medieval times Veerabrahmendra Swamy’s predictions will come true in 2012 and 2014. Her caretaker Usha Rani says she has miraculous powers. Would you like to comment?”

I was being invited to participate in live discussions on these channels; already Dr. Vijayam and Mr. Lavanam were on one of them, speaking from the Atheist Center in Vijayawada. There were some orthodox Hindus as well on the panels. My response was: “It is nonsense, because rebirth implies we have a soul which can retain memories. No one has shown that the soul exists and we all know that the seat of memory is the brain which dies with the rest of the body. Claims of rebirth are culturally conditioned which is why we do not hear of them in Muslim or Christian or African societies. No claim of rebirth has been shown to be true in Hinduism or in Buddhism”.

“But sir, they are also showing video clips of the child with the Dalai Lama. It seems he approves of it, and that he has accepted that she was his childhood friend”.
“Have you verified this claim with the Dalai Lama? In any case, I would not be really surprised – the Dalai Lama believes in reincarnation. He also is desperate that as he gets old he has to do his best to get Tibet on the world’s radar again. This year is the 50th year since the Dalai Lama's escape from Tibet and it is the 60th year of the People’s Republic of China. The timing is good for some gimmicks!” Some of the Dalai Lama’s religious beliefs are even dangerous”.

“But sir, is he not the most important Buddhist leader?”

The Dalai Lama
“Not really! There are 300 million Buddhists in the world, and the Buddhists are divided into Hinayana (or Theravada), Mahayana and Vajrayana sects. The Vajrayana Buddhists are associated with Tantric practices and most of the Tibetans are associated with that school of Buddhism. The Buddha did not believe in a soul or in a rebirth of this kind, so many Buddhists are opposed to the Dalai Lama’s religious beliefs. And there are not many Vajrayana Tibetan Buddhists – only 6 million Tibetans if you take the Dalai Lama’s own figures - or 2.5 million if you believe the Chinese government. And amongst the Vajrayana Tibetan Buddhists there are again 4 sects, and the Dalai Lama is the head of just one of them – the Gelugpa sect. He does not represent all Buddhists, but of course he is well known as he is a Nobel Peace Prize laureate.

“Did you know that the Dalai Lama rebelled and escaped from Tibet at a time when China wanted to tax the income of his institutions? When he was in Tibet it is said that he had over 6000 serfs, and that this ascetic who renounced all was staying in the 1000-room Potala Palace!”

“Sir, please come to the studio and say this. We want to show your point of view”.

And so was spoiled another Sunday (and many more weekdays and weekends since). We have been on dozens of TV discussions and public meetings; several colleagues like JVV leaders T.V. Rao and Ramesh; Radical Humanist C.L.N. Gandhi, Rationalist lawyer Madhusudan, feminist Volga, head of CEASE Child Labour and industrialist Kotapati Murahari Rao, and myself.

Our Questions
We coordinated strategy and arguments: in discussions we asked what Sambhavi’s real name was in this life, and what her name was when she was a friend of the Dalai Lama in her previous birth. As Sambhavi is reputed to have met with the Madhyamika philosopher Nagarjuna who died many centuries ago, we wondered why she did not meet with the Buddha as well. We asked who Sambhavi’s real parents were as only Usha Rani who is parading as Sambhavi’s caretaker seemed to be around. What were the economic interests behind this claim, we queried. And if the Dalai Lama was visiting Surya Nandi to inaugurate Buddha Vijayam - the ashram being built for Sambhavi - what are his interests? He has been talking of late in several voices, making even some Tibetans angry: once he offered to be reborn even before he died; on another occasion he said that he would be reborn outside Tibet, and that it could even be as a girl. On yet another occasion, outraging the really orthodox, he said his reincarnation could be elected by the people of Tibet! If it is true that he was coming, was he coming to nominate his successor? We also pointed out that the sooth sayer Veerabrahmendra Swamy’s predictions were hardly what someone could take credibly – there is no authentic text, nothing has been predicted in a verifiable manner – there is only myth, legend, pulp fiction and popular cinema.
In any case, this silly salad of adult superstition, unconvincing stories of ancient soothsayers occupied TV screens for the next 3 months in Andhra Pradesh. While TV5, NTV and MAHAA TV turned a skeptical eye towards the developments, the highest TRP rated TV9 had several special documentaries. Their team travelled to the Dalai Lama’s headquarters Dharamshala in North India to discuss with the officials of the so-called Tibetan Parliament-in-exile and the so-called Tibetan-Government-in-exile. Almost all the channels boasted special interviews and special discussions with the ‘spiritualist’, ‘miracle’ child. Most recently, on 14 Nov, India’s Children’s Day, Sakshi Newspaper, with the largest circulation in the state with 1.2 million copies daily shocked us with a mindless analysis of Sambhavi’s divinity in a two page special.

Thanks to all the media promotion, Telugu people soon knew everything about Sambhavi - a lovable child with charming mannerisms: daughter of Bengali brahmins living in Varanasi, she was made a sanyasin at the age of 4, and once when she went into a trance she travelled to the Himalayas where she met the Dalai Lama and also read Tibetan manuscripts. The child’s caretaker Usha Rani claimed that Sambhavi expressed concern for the Dalai Lama's health and suggested that the Dalai Lama became healthy after Sambhavi prayed for him. We all now knew that Sambhavi held regular confidential telepathic discussions with the Dalai Lama with regards to the future of Tibet. We were told that she speaks 5 languages fluently, blesses whoever prostrates in front of her, and that the devotees were quickly benefitted emotionally and economically. Sambhavi came to Surya Nandi with a famous film singer's family and when she arrived here she miraculously started speaking Telugu, and chose to establish her ashram there!

**What did Sambhavi Say?**

But all the reports from the gushing journalists, the charming childish talk of Sambhavi and the halo of the Dalai Lama's support could not hide the real estate business being set up in and around Surya Nandi, the eagerness of Usha Rani to promote her ward's supernatural claims, or the incoherence of the child and the political nature of the statements being made through her. Here is a sample:

- India is doing well because India has Buddhism.
- China and Pakistan have bad people. They will be punished.
- Tibet will be free in 2016; China will become democratic in 2012.
- I was born for Tibet's freedom and I will do anything for Tibet's freedom.
- There is a giant statue of the Buddha in the soil in Tibet – it went inside the soil because otherwise China would take it away. It will emerge from the earth as a ray of light.
- The Dalai Lama was the Buddhist deity Balabhadra in the past life and I (Sambhavi) was the Buddhist goddess Ugra Taraka Devi.
- Lord Siva is in Tibet. Hanuman will go to Tibet, worship him, and he will free Tibet.
- All non-vegetarians will be destroyed when Veerabrahmendra Swami will reincarnate as Veerabhoga Vasantarayalu in Surya Nandi on 14 January 2012.
- Veerabhoga Vasantarayalu will also pull out the eyes and the hearts of non-believers (atheists).
- Jagan Mohan Reddy, son of late Rajasekhar Reddy will become the next Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh state.
How to Stop This?
The constant media hype and the frenzy that accompanied it, the announcement of the impending visit of the Dalai Lama and the daily challenge to our sanity were priming us up for action. Now there was also news that India's richest industrialist and one of the world's wealthiest individuals Anil Ambani donated Rs. 1 Crore (Rs. 10 million or USD 200,000) to Surya Nandi temple. The Dalai Lama, it was announced, would come on 21 Dec. to inaugurate Sambhavi’s ashram.

There was now an urgency for action as things seemed to be rapidly getting out of hand. What if the Dalai Lama arrives as threatened on 21 Dec in Surya Nandi and declares that Sambhavi would be his successor? Even if he did not do that, what if he declares Buddha Vijayam as Sambhavi's ashram? If that was done, Sambhavi would never be able to have a normal childhood. This is how in Nepal Hindu maidens are made Kumaris, who are till puberty considered divine and after nearly a decade of isolation from the rest of society are thrown out of temples to fend for themselves.

So, I started putting together a strategy, working with colleagues and collaborators and in discussion with Prof. Narendra Nayak, President of Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations.

We had to do a number of things:

c). Invite the cooperation of fellow Humanists and progressives.
d). Prepare the ground for international action, and consult with Roy Brown for raising the matter at the UN in Geneva once local remedies are tried out.
e). Ascertain whether the Dalai Lama and Anil Ambani really supported Sambhavi.
f). Make the Sambhavi matter a house hold issue for which the media needed to be involved.

Along with Sri Kotapati Murahari Rao, President of CEASE Child Labour and Treasurer of the Rationalist Association of India, and the well known novelist Pydi Chandra Latha a list of possible collaborators was drawn up; Manava Vikasa Vedika (MVV), Jana Vignana Vedika (JVV) and Muralidhar Isanaka of the Rationalist Forum of Hyderabad were also consulted.

We first approached Prof. Shantha Sinha, the Ramon Magasaysay Award winner for Human Rights and India's first Chairperson of the National Commission for the Protection of the Rights of Children. To Muralidhar Isanaka, Kotapati Murahari Rao, Chandra Latha and me she even suggested that the Commission itself could approach the High Court to save the child.

20 Nov: Universal Child Rights Day
We then announced to the media that our day of public action would be 20 Nov ‘09 which marks 20 years of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and 50 years since the UN's Declaration on the Rights of the Child.

The response from the media was most helpful for the progress of the campaign. Zee 24 hours was extraordinary: one of their officials said, 'we never realized that there was this other angle to
the Sambhavi story. We would like to partner with you all in this Human Rights campaign. Please come to our studios where we will organize a 2-hr live discussion on Sambhavi. Then our cameras will follow you throughout the day and we will come with you to the Human Rights Commission’. I agreed, on the condition that no astrologers or religious fundamentalists be invited – I was merely repeating my TV 9 appeal of 17 August that this was a Human Rights question, not a debate about rebirth. Zee readily agreed and involved many of the co-petitioners in the phone in program as also Child Rights activist Sri Chikku Murali Mohan from Sadhana.

Later, at the Office of the State Human Rights Commission, HM TV and I News had their OB Vans, from where they covered the events live. The media was present in full force to hear what we were going to say to the Honorable Subhashan Reddy, the former Chief Justice of Madras High Court and of Kerala High Courts, and now Chairperson of the Human Rights Commission.

Mr. Justice Subhashan Reddy heard us with great sympathy and concern for the child. Present and involved were A.B.K. Prasad, senior journalist and former Chairperson of the Official Languages Commission, the noted feminist and editor Kondaveeti Satyavati, distinguished feminist and leader of Asmita, Mrs. Volga, the educationists Prabhakara Sastri, the child rights activist Sri. Achyuth Rao, JVV’s T.V. Rao etc. Two children, Ms. Sahasi, grand daughter of MVV’s Hanumantha Rao and Arun Gogineni added to the occasion, reminding all how a happy and normal childhood would be.

We submitted to the judge respectfully that

- This was not a religious debate, but a Human Rights struggle.
- Children who have been identified as the reincarnation of a dead person have always been psychologically damaged much before adulthood.
- Sambhavi has the right to a normal childhood, to be brought up in the loving care of a mother, and to play.
- It appears that the child has been indoctrinated for nearly 3 years and it had lost all touch with reality. Such mental abuse should attract the relevant civil and criminal provisions of the law.
- Not the religious views of the parents but the best interests of a child are paramount.

We urged the Judge to take action and directions:

a). For the rehabilitation of Sambhavi into normal life with the help of child psychologists.
b). To the State government to take immediate steps to halt the abuse.
c). To summon Sambhavi’s parents and Ms. Usha Rani and the relevant birth records of Sambhavi to ensure that she has not been a victim of abduction and exploitation.
d). To issue notice to the Dalai Lama to ascertain if he or his organization has a role in this.
e). To issue guidelines to the media so that they will report such matters with sensitivity.

We also submitted that we were offended that a crime of abuse of a child is being portrayed as a spiritual achievement, to the detriment of the child’s best interests.
In response, recalling that when previously a child was being used for TV reality shows he had passed orders putting it in the protection of a Government Child Home, the Honorable Judge passed instant orders to the Collector of the Kurnool district to present a report on the parentage of Sambhavi as well as whether the Human Rights of Sambhavi are being violated. In view of the urgency, the Collector was given just 10 days to report – till 30 Nov 09.

Gudilona, Badilona?
Golla Venkatesh worked with me to create a poster and a banner for the campaign with the question ‘Sambhavi Gudilona, Badilona? Manavavadula, Hetuvadula Prasna’. (Humanists & Rationalists Ask: Should Sambhavi be in a School or in a Temple?). The curtain was raised for launching a new debate in all sections of society on questions that matter to all. Along with Sri T.V. Rao of JVV and Sri C.L.N. Gandhi of the IRHA we shared our media responsibilities so that the voice of reason could be heard by a large number of people.

After we submitted our complaint, the media coverage for the event, and following a 30 minute discussion on Live TV on TV9 where I also debated the obnoxious Usha Rani, Tirupataiah, a young and dashing journalist from Eenadu Newspaper called me asking for help and moral support for the stories he was planning to write and for which he was being threatened by Mrs. Usha Rani. I offered our full cooperation. More journalists got in touch, from Prajasakti newspaper and from other TV outlets.

But what about the Administration?
The Child Welfare Department did nothing for Sambhavi in the last 2-and-a-half months despite the obscene publicity. The Endowments Department took no action even though it was a well known fact that she was staying in the temple, illegally and with no permission. They did not move even when a temple wall was demolished, apparently by the occupants. The District Collector who ordered an inquiry by the Nandyal Revenue Divisional Officer (RDO) on 24 November did so only after being ordered to do so by the Human Rights Commission. Could we trust the Administration?

I therefore decided that I would go to Kurnool and Nandyal towns to give evidence to the inquiry even if it was not an entirely safe thing to do. But I was grateful that Mr. Ramabrahmam from JVV and Mr. KVR Reddy from MVV volunteered to come on behalf of their organizations, and to help with the security. They never let me address any meeting or even the press without standing behind me. All said that because of the physical build of KVR we were safe from any mischief and attacks – jokes that KVR took with good humour. KVR even offered his car for the visit to Nandyal, while JVV's lawyer Madhusudan (who filed the court case against the claims of fish medicine to cure asthma) and Mr. Suresh Kumar offered the support for meeting with the Collector in Kurnool and the RDO in Nandyal.

The meeting with the Collector was widely reported, both in TV and in newspapers. After 2 months of seeming negligence, the Collector was suddenly put under public pressure. He did not have the courtesy of offering a seat to our delegation – he showed some impatience that we went to the Human Rights Commission! We urged him that India was a Secular Country, that the Dalai Lama needed no special treatment as his supposed visit was to perform a private religious duty, that Sambhavi needed protection and that his district was now the laughing stock of the world.
The next day was when we met with Dr. Madhavi Latha, the former scientist from ICRISAT who is now the RDO and the Inquiry officer, along with the Deputy Superintendent of Police Samayjohn Rao and Zubeida Begum the Integrated Child Development Scheme Officer. Dr. Madhavi Latha met us after the first questioning of Usha Rani for 4 hours: defying the notices to appear, Usha Rani arrived without Sambhavi! The next day she came with the child's supposed father Soumya Acharya from Varanasi, but again without Sambhavi after which she was forced to bring her! “We will not bring Sambhavi to the inquiry as she is a child”, had said one of the persons there on day one. “There is no need to bring her”, said her lawyer to the TV channels waiting for his sound bite on the first day! We made a full presentation, made our arguments and also gave the RDO details of people who were claiming to be victims of Usha Rani’s deception in the name of Sambhavi’s spiritual powers. It is impossible that the child has miraculous powers, therefore the claims of supernatural powers and the subsequent marketing of the child and collection of donations was tantamount to deception and exploitation, we urged.

**The Hindu Right Wingers**

TV9 was covering everything live, and their journalist excitedly announced that the situation was tense and that violence was expected between the two groups that were gathering there. Already a group belonging to the Student Federation of India who arrived with no prior information to us - but to support our petition - was arrested by the police and taken away. Members and leaders of the Hindu right wing VHP and RSS who had gathered there started shouting slogans against us, giving dire warnings to Rationalists for interfering with Hindu religious affairs. They picked up a fight with me. Some were drunk and all appeared intoxicated with their religion. After some 10 minutes of live TV interview, the police advised us to leave since the VHP activists were becoming increasingly difficult and aggressive.

We left but not before clarifying to the media and to the people who gathered there not to miss the excitement of this show: we filed the petition to save Sambhavi. She has shown no miracles and should not be called a goddess. She has to go to school and should not be exploited in the name of religion: India would progress as a nation if all went to school. In any case, Sambhavi is a Buddhist and so the Hindus need not get agitated unnecessarily by our action. Not only the Rationalists but also many religious and non religious people were morally offended by how the child was being abused. Their humanitarian instincts were waiting for a formal avenue to express themselves. Our petition and campaign was on all their behalf.
Further Developments …

The official inquiry was conducted for 3 days in all. Despite the empty boasting of Usha Rani’s lawyer and unclear threats of legal action, Sambhavi was finally produced in front of the inquiry. The press reports that Usha Rani was ordered out of the temple by the Endowments Department, and the local villagers also largely expressed their disbelief in Sambhavi’s miraculous powers when the inquiry was taking place. We were confidentially passed on recordings of telephone threats made by Usha Rani to some journalists. Others have received threatening phone calls. We are keeping a record.

The District Collector has sent a 36-page interim report to the Human Rights Commission on 30 Nov. asking for more time to establish the child’s parentage. But already he said that the child has no miraculous powers, that Usha Rani had no legal custody of the child, that she and Sambhavi’s supposed father were making so many contradictory statements that he wants to verify whether he is the real father of the child: two teams will be dispatched to Varanasi and Usha Rani’s home village.

The Collector’s report notes that Usha Rani says she is 48 years old, that she completed her BA from Mysoora University, that she says she does not remember where the university is located nor the year when she passed the exams! He also noted that neither she nor 36 year old Soumya Acharya are willing to produce the birth certificate of the child. Soumya Acharya says he will not reveal the mother’s name who he says was his first wife, deceased when the child was 7 months old.

They say that it is a Brahmin tradition to conduct home schooling, but do not explain why Soumya Acharya’s second child, through his second wife, goes to school. Of course, parents have the right to provide home schooling but they certainly have no right to exploit. And when Soumya Acharya went on TV and said that as per their traditions they are not supposed to touch others, it is an incitement to the practice of untouchability.

Eenadu, Andhra Jyothy, Vaartha, Saakshi and Praja Sakti Newspapers are gathering and publishing more evidence. Some have revealed that the Varanasi addresses given by them were fake; some traced and spoke to Usha Rani’s aged parents who pleaded with the media that they were leading a respectable life and that they had no contact with their daughter for a number of years. While Usha Rani said to the Inquiry that her son lived in the US, some journalists claim that he lived, in fact, in Bangalore.

The Collector who is the District Magistrate ordered that a caretaker and a police constable be posted with Sambhavi pending clarity about the child’s real parents. He prohibited Usha Rani and Soumya Acharya from taking Sambhavi from the area without government permission. As I write this, the Minister for Education Mr. Manikya Vara Prasad said on TV that he does not understand Usha Rani’s behavior. The Home Minister Ms. Sabita Reddy ordered a Crime Investigation Department inquiry.
Meanwhile, Usha Rani continues to make preparations for the Dalai Lama’s visit and the newspapers report that his Regional Representative from Bangalore, Mr. Dorje, made a secret visit to Surya Nandi to discuss arrangements. One newspaper alleged that Dorje has a financial stake in the whole matter! The Police say they have received no intimation of the Dalai Lama’s visit. If the Dalai Lama insists on coming to inaugurate the ashram proposed in the name of Sambhavi, then the scandal will be treated with the full force and outrage that it will deserve and we will also write to the Nobel Peace Prize Committee. I wrote to Anil Ambani about his supposed donation for the Surya Nandi temple. We await an answer.

In fact we expect that more answers will come out – not just because the Administration is working on it, but because a number of journalists are on the job. Whatever those answers are, we know that one thing is already achieved: not only did we touch the common people’s hearts, not only did we expose the hysteria about the child’s miracles as a crime against the child, we also convinced the media about our angle and changed the terms of the debate. Our responsibility in the matter has increased because of the public’s positive expectations. And the only test of victory for our efforts and our campaign would be when Sambhavi is freed from the clutches of those exploiting her so that she could grow to her full potential. I hope that all this will be achieved with minimum damage to the child’s psyche - I am sure there will be pain.

Some people ask us why we are interested in Sambhavi when there are millions of other children in India, all of them suffering. They ask us if we will help all of them as well.

We respond that every child has to be rescued child by child, and that they need not wait for us to help those they have identified: we suggest that this is a moral obligation that they too can share. That it is a national duty to help children in a country which is 139th in the comity of nations for living standards, and which shamefully has the world’s biggest concentration of child labor. We also remind them that it is a national malady that when someone does something good the onlookers query why this good thing, and not another!

We then remind them that of the millions of children who are deprived and exploited it is only Sambhavi who is being paraded as a goddess or as one with miraculous powers, and around whom a business is sought to be built in the name of spirituality and religiosity. We clarify that we took up the case of Sambhavi because if we did not take up the case no one else would. However, we do this not because we are atheists or rationalists – that is immaterial completely because amongst those who support us there are huge numbers of believers - we do this in the name of our common humanity and to defend India’s secularism. In any case, we ask: ‘does your religion allow a child to be exploited like that? If not, how can you allow Sambhavi to be exploited in the name of your religion?’. But most do not need to hear these arguments – they have already seen and followed the story, and just want to shake hands to support our stand. We have been meeting them every day in restaurants, parks, supermarkets, banks and in the street.

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