

Agni-Baba

Fat Leia had told me abo
ut Baba many times. She had been introduced to him by an Indian woman named Padma, who spoke Russian.
Every time I came to Pune for a short visit from town X., Leia tried to drag me to see Baba. She assured me that Baba was enlightened.
I'd had enough of the “enlightened” guru in X., and I came to Pune to take a break from his “enlightenment”, without even realizing it.
But this time I gave in.
We rode for a couple of hours in a motor rickshaw, heading out of Pune towards low mountains and hills densely covered with greenery. There were hardly any signs of human habitation here, and therefore none of those “signs of civilization” such as piles of rubbish, dirty plastic bags and rags “dancing” in the wind.
There were no people in sight, nor was there that indispensable feature of every secluded corner of nature in these parts: human excrement. Which meant there were no corresponding smells either. Here, the ancient Indian earth breathed health and unfading youth, revealing its dazzling face.
Nobody lived here. Except Agni-Baba.

At least, that was how it looked.
So much uninhabited space. A rarity in India.
It was clean!
Untouched and peaceful. Quiet.
The low mountains, or perhaps high hills, were entirely covered with tangled wild greenery. At the foot of the mountains lay a valley as flat as a thali plate. Here and there were bushes and patches of grass yellowed by the sun. Golden grass.
Occasionally, there were small trees. Underfoot were small stones and hard, parched, reddish-brown earth. Little islands of green bushes, surrounded by soil the colour of red, glowed intensely green in the sunlight, like emeralds. They were low and round, resembling billiard balls scattered across a field.
For a while, we walked away from the road, deeper into this quiet “continent”. The rickshaw driver, too, drove a little farther in and, leaving his rickshaw beneath a small tree, continued on foot beside us.
We approached some kind of structure. Man-made.
In terms of “architecture” — a typical slum. Four walls had been put together from scraps of sheet metal, roofing slate, plywood and something else, with a roof and an opening serving as a door, covered by a hanging piece of fabric. But everything was clean and somehow “new”, without a layer of dust or signs of wear.
We looked inside — nobody.
The floor of this place, whether a little temple or a dwelling, was simply bare earth, carefully swept clean. Against the wall opposite the entrance stood a platform made of wooden planks. On it lay a mat, a couple of pillows and something resembling a blanket.
To the left, at the foot of the platform, was an area about two by two metres, carefully enclosed by large, round, blackened stones. Inside this enclosure, embers were smouldering beneath a thick layer of delicate, silvery ash. Above the ash rose a stone Shiva lingam, leaning against the wall. A sabre was stuck into the ground, protruding from the ash, and beside it stood a trident. Both the trident and the sabre were blackened by ash and constant heat.
This was where Agni-Baba lived.
Against the wall, opposite the fire, lay a mat folded in half. Apparently, it was for visitors.
We went outside to wait for the owner.
Someone appeared who evidently cleaned around the dwelling. Judging by his appearance, a peasant.
It seemed strange that here, in the middle of this almost untouched corner of nature, someone was walking around the structure with a stiff, prickly broom, scraping little stones and raising dust. I suspect he did it out of respect for Baba, to show his reverence, rather than out of necessity.
The sweeper and the rickshaw driver exchanged a few words in Marathi, and the driver told us that Baba would return soon.
I was somewhat skeptical.

All Leia's enthusiasm about the enlightened Baba made me smile condescendingly. Leia declined the word “Baba” in the Russian manner, and I began calling him that too, in a familiar, homely way.
Big Leia, who had come from Odessa, was a cheerful, bright soul. Even “naive”, but that should not be confused with “stupid”. Leia's naivety came from a certain inner purity. At the heart of her wisdom and insight was a desire to see the best in everyone and everything. If she couldn't “see the best”, Leia knew how to feel compassion and forgive.
She loved singing traditional Russian romances.
Very emotional, she managed to find something to admire in almost everything. She had an inexhaustible ocean of energy. In her bright blue eyes, which adorned her pretty round face, the sea of Odessa was splashing.
Despite her grotesque fullness, Leia was not shapeless. There was a considerable difference between the size of her hips and her waist, and her face was not disfigured by double or triple chins. Leia was beautiful in her own way.
Everyone called her “Mom” because she was always ready to help, heal and feed anyone. It was comforting to be around her. At the same time, she was practical and knew how to count money and how to earn it. This blue-eyed blonde, with her enormous bottom and impressively large breasts, possessed remarkable intuition and was phenomenal at reading cards. That was how she earned some money in Pune.
We had to wait about fifteen minutes. It was getting hot. There was a tree beside the hut, and we huddled together in its sparse shade.
And then he appeared — Baba.
His short, slender figure, dressed in bright orange robes, resembled a tongue of flame. The resemblance was heightened by a piece of orange cloth wrapped around his head in the shape of a tall cone.
The bright colour of his clothing emphasised his long, jet-black beard and moustache. He had a swarthy face, with small but somehow piercing eyes.I was struck by his enormous, heavy earrings. They were not gold. Perhaps silver, I'm not sure. But it wasn't the earrings themselves that impressed me — it was the way they were inserted into his ears.
The earrings were not in his earlobes. Rather large holes had been made in the outer parts of his ears, and it was from these holes that the massive ornaments hung.
Around Baba's neck was a rudraksha mala, a traditional attribute of the god Shiva and his devotees.
Baba smiled and gestured for us to come inside.
We sat along the wall on a mat spread out on the ground, while Baba sat on the platform, crossing his legs into the lotus position. The rickshaw driver introduced each of us to Baba (besides Leia and me, there were also Sa-i and Dima).
Baba smiled affectionately, nodded his head and occasionally clapped his hands with delight. Compared with the formidable, fat and tall guru from X., Baba looked unserious and childlike.

We had brought sweets and bananas. Leia placed our gifts beside Baba on the platform. Agni-Baba looked at our prasad, smiled, beckoned to the man who had been cleaning around the hut and handed him everything except the bananas.
Later I learned that everything people brought to Agni-Baba — sweets, cakes, biscuits, money, jewellery, warm shawls, clothes and so on — he gave away to his visitors. Most of those who came to this little temple were poor and had large families, and Baba supported them with money and whatever else he could. Sometimes he treated their illnesses.
From the bananas we had brought, Baba chose one and held it very delicately between his fingers, like a crystal ball. With the fingers of his other hand, he began touching the banana.
He somehow withdrew inwardly from us. With the banana in his hand and his eyes half-closed, Baba seemed very far away, although he was sitting right beside us. Almost inaudibly, he was reciting some mantra. This did not last long.
Then his eyes lit up again, and he smiled slightly. With his slender, dark fingers, he broke the banana into several pieces. He said something to the rickshaw driver in Marathi.
The driver translated that this banana was prasad from Agni-Baba.
Everyone present received a piece.
Oh, those prasads! How many of them I'd already eaten!
At the guru's in X., prasads were abundant and expensive, sometimes consisting of several dishes, sometimes of exquisite Indian sweets. At other gurus' places, there were also fruits, thali, nuts... anything edible, really. Everything was served on large disposable plates made from palm leaves, and sometimes on metal plates, also large.
Sometimes it was very tasty, sometimes not so much... Prasad is food that embodies “divine mercy”, a symbol of “divine grace”. Blessed by a saint or guru, this food is believed to cleanse one of sins, karma and diseases. It is a blessing from God.
That was how it had been explained to me.
But I found nothing “divine” or “blessed” in it, although I had expected to. After eating all those prasads, there was no elevated state, no lightness of heart, no particular joy or improvement in health. Apparently, prasad was simply a custom, an ancient belief. Just a meal with the guru and all the disciples together. In pleasant company, so to speak. And nothing more.
And here, in this little Baba Yaga-style hut, prasad again.
Tradition is tradition. I'm a polite person, so I made namaste and took the piece of banana Agni-Baba offered me.
Impressed by the simplicity of the surroundings and the “interior”, a thought flashed through my mind like lightning, completely beyond my control: “I hope I don't catch some infection.”
Later, whenever I remembered that thought, I felt ashamed.

Putting the prasad into my mouth, I decided with boredom that Agni-Baba's earrings had probably been the most impressive thing about this trip. And I began patiently waiting for us to return to Pune.

But the little piece of banana, enchanted by Baba, spread through my entire body like wine.
An extraordinary peace and serenity descended upon me. I felt unimaginably good. All the mental and emotional tension I had been tormenting myself with over the past few months evaporated.
Through my mind, a thought-feeling drifted like a slowly gliding rowboat: “I've arrived!”
This was the first real Prasad of my life.
All the other “prasads” had been just food.
And Baba went on clapping his hands from time to time and laughing. Very unserious.
As we were leaving, he cleansed each of us with a little broom made of peacock feathers and gave us some ash wrapped in little packets made from newspaper. The ash came from the corner where the sabre and trident stood.
The ash was to be taken in tiny pinches. To be eaten, rubbed onto sore places, or used to make a dot on the spot of the third eye.
Leia, who also earned money by giving massages, began adding this ash to her massage oil. She said that people felt something special after such a massage.
On one of our visits to Agni-Baba, he told Leia and me that he would like to initiate us into Agni Yoga.
By that time, I had already received several different initiations, and I saw no point in having another one.
But Leia! She was so excited about it! She wanted it so much, and she believed in Agni-Baba wholeheartedly. She wanted to go through the initiation together with me.
You had to know Leia. She was a real charmer! Her eagerness, inspiration and joy were like a storm! Enthusiasm turned her into a little girl, even though she was over forty.
I agreed.
Orange clothing was required for the initiation. I would have to buy some.
Considering my limited financial circumstances, there was no question of my buying an “outfit” that I would never wear again after the initiation.
Without telling Leia anything about it, I thought that Baba wouldn't initiate me if I wasn't dressed properly, and everything would resolve itself. I would simply attend the ritual of Leia's transformation into Agni-Leia and share her joy. And that would be all.
We arrived at Baba's early in the morning. We had left Pune while it was still dark.
I don't remember exactly, but I think the ritual was supposed to take place at sunrise.
We brought the necessary flowers and fruit.

Two sannyasins from Osho's ashram came with us. They were Australians. Leia had introduced them to Baba a few days earlier, and they too desired initiation into Agni Yoga. Agni-Baba agreed to initiate them but said that the ritual would cost 1,000 rupees.
When the Australians had left, I told Baba that I was refusing the initiation. Too expensive.
Baba replied (he spoke a little English) that he knew I had no money. And, in general, he knew whom to ask for what. Later, that money went towards medical treatment for one of the poor people who visited Baba.
The fact that my clothing was not the fiery orange colour required for initiation into Agni Yoga did not stop Baba.
Everyone was initiated.
We arrived at Agni-Baba's before dawn.
The ritual was supposed to take place at sunrise.
We brought flowers and fruit.
I don't remember the initiation ritual very well. Everything happened as if in a dream.
Inside Baba's little house, it was dim.
There was a sweet smell of burning incense. In the corner, where the outlines of the trident and sabre could be made out through clouds of lilac smoke, glowing embers flared brightly, piercing the smoky veil.
Baba seated me and began chanting mantras and doing something around me with flowers and water. I briefly noticed several small bowls arranged in a semicircle beside me. One contained flowers, another water, and a third, I think, prasad — sweets... Something else, too. It didn't matter to me.
I closed my eyes.
“Om Namah Shivaya!”, “Om Shiva!” Baba repeated, along with other words, in different variations and combinations.
I could feel him sprinkling fragrant rose petals over my head. They slid down my cheeks and fell onto my lap, onto my hands resting there. I think he sprinkled me with water, too. Perhaps he gave me prasad. I don't remember.
It's strange that all this has remained in my memory like a transparent, indistinct watercolour sketch — a mere hint. And no details.
One day, Sai and I set off to visit Agni-Baba.
It was a long journey, and we talked all the way.

I told him how everything had been organised in the town of X. around that other guru. How the satsangs were held there...
Everything there had been brought up to European-American standards. Long gone were the days when the guru held satsangs in his small, private, single-storey house, with breaks for homemade tea, when the atmosphere was homely and warm, without ceremony or worship.
The large hall where the satsangs took place was air-conditioned. And after the satsangs — a restaurant. The hall sometimes accommodated more than a hundred and fifty people. Everything was civilised, comfortable, clean. The guru himself had changed, too...

Now he spoke English into a microphone, and everything he said was recorded on video.
The organisers of all this comfort at the satsangs had been given permanent places of honour right at the guru's feet. This was considered a blessing and a mark of distinction.
They watched over him with fanatical devotion, making sure that he lacked nothing, not only during the satsangs but also at home.
Books containing the texts of his satsangs were published in English and many other languages, and later in Russian.
The organisation of the satsang venue was based on the experience of the ashram residents from Pune. The very same ashram where my beloved Osho had once given darshans.
Former sannyasins who came here brought their experience, something close to professionalism, and money. At first, many of them came here, to the town of X. Some stayed, some returned from time to time, and some, having visited once, never came back.
All this atmosphere of reverence surrounding the “enlightened” guru, known throughout the world and referred to as a “Zen Master” — a guru who himself hinted that he was an incarnation of the god Rama, and later of Krishna — could hardly fail to impress.

Everyone, myself included, bowed down to him and worshipped him.
It never even occurred to me to look inside myself and ask what I REALLY felt and thought about all this. I had stopped listening to and trusting my own intuition, my own feelings. This powerful, tsunami-like wave of collective worship, deification of the guru, unquestioning obedience and service to him swept me away, made me doubt my own perception of him, and carried me along like a splinter of wood.
Where did it carry me? Straight to hell.
Being, by nature, an individualist who was not susceptible to hypnosis, I somehow, without even noticing it, started running with the herd.
Apparently, that was what I wanted.
Apparently, there was something I needed to learn from all this.
Nothing in our lives happens without our consent. Even if we are unaware of having given it.
But I would understand all this later. Years later.
And now, as we were approaching Agni-Baba's dwelling, having compared him with that other guru, I said:
“You know, Sai, Baba is very sweet. Perhaps he's even enlightened, but he is not a Master.”
We approached Baba's little hut. Ducking under the heavy piece of cloth that served as a door, we found ourselves standing right in front of Agni-Baba.
We greeted him with namaste.
Baba smiled and, looking at me, said gently:
“Sami, I am the Master.”