

Rise of the shamans

One of the oldest spiritual practices in the world is attracting a growing bunch of Indians who are hoping to solve their problems by connecting to an unseen world

Atul Sethi | TNN

The sound of drumbeats reverberates in the small conference room as the shaman goes into a trance. The others present — their eyes closed — focus on the rhythmic sounds as the shaman makes the journey to a parallel reality in search for solutions to the various problems the motley group has brought with it.

For most people this may seem weird — even eerie — but it is becoming a fairly routine experience for many. People from different professions — students, businessmen, housewives, even former army men — are turning to shamanism, an ancient spiritual practice where the practitioner communes with “spirit guides” to gain access to information and healing.

Gurpreet Singh, who left a flourishing corporate career to take up shamanism full-time, now conducts workshops throughout the country. He says that people are attracted to it as “it is the path of direct revelation, which accentuates the fact that we are a part of a web of life where everything is connected to everything else.”

Cosima Klinger-Paul, an Austrian who moved to India in 2000 and has started a school of shamanism in the country, says that the interest in the practice is not surprising. “Shamanism has always been there in every culture. It is the oldest healing method of humankind. What we are seeing now is simply its resurfacing.”

But how exactly does shamanism work? Shamans believe that all illnesses have a spiritual cause, which manifests in the physical body. Hence, healing the spiritual cause heals the physical body.



Illustration by Mili Raj

SOUL AND SPIRIT A painting by a graphic artist shows a shaman and his connection with heaven and earth

Harnam Sidhu, a 46-year-old marketing executive, swears by the practice. “It helped reverse my disease,” he says. Sidhu was suffering from glaucoma — a degenerative condition that causes loss of optic nerves leading to blindness. He had lost 98% of the optic nerve endings in one eye and doctors had told him it was a matter of months before he went completely blind in the bad eye. As a last resort, he tried out shamanism. After a few sessions, when he went for check up, his doctor told him that a miracle had happened — his condition was starting to reverse.

Was it really shamanism at work or simply the placebo effect? Ardent believers stress that

shamanic healing succeeds because it is an established tradition that has stood the test of time. “Shamanism operates on a set of principles that have been tested time and again over centuries. The proof of its success lies in the testimonials of those who have benefited from it,” says Singh.

What then are the principles that shamanism operates on? An important shamanic belief is the concept of “soul loss.” Shamanic cultures around the globe believe that whenever someone suffers an extreme physical or emotional trauma, a piece of his soul falls off taking the memories of that trauma with it. “It’s a survival measure,” says Klinger-Paul. “Over time, most of these soul parts return but some don’t. Soul loss manifests in most people through feelings of emptiness and depression.”

Shamans claim that they address this problem by tracking a person’s lost soul part with the help of spirit guides. In order to do so, they travel to another reality in a state of altered consciousness. This is known as “divination journey.” “Shamanism is all about working with spirits and getting direct answers from them,” says Singh. “Spirits, incidentally, is a rather misunderstood and misused term in India. In shamanism, it refers to ascended masters, avatars and our

ancestors, and not souls stuck to the earth plane or lower levels.”

Once the person gets his soul part back, shamans believe that the lost vitality and health also comes back. Is it really as simplistic as this? Those who have undergone shamanic healing sessions seem to think so. Shelly Khanna, who took shamanic healing for a frozen shoulder condition, says 80% of her pain vanished after the session. “I went as a skeptic but was so amazed by the experience that I resolved to learn shamanism. Since then, I have participated in many workshops and also recommended shamanism to my friends and family, including a relative who had breast cancer and who is now in remission after shamanic healing.”

Notwithstanding the cases of ‘miracle cures’, shamans insist that theirs is no magic wand that can erase problems or diseases. “Shamanism is not a religion but an adventure into one’s own mind,” says Klinger-Paul. “It takes time to become familiar and to deal with the spirit world. I tend to refrain from requests for quick healing. This is not a spiritual aspirin that you can pop and be healed.” A caution that, hopefully, people will heed when they opt to connect to a different world.



MASTER CLASS Gurpreet Singh conducting one of his workshops

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