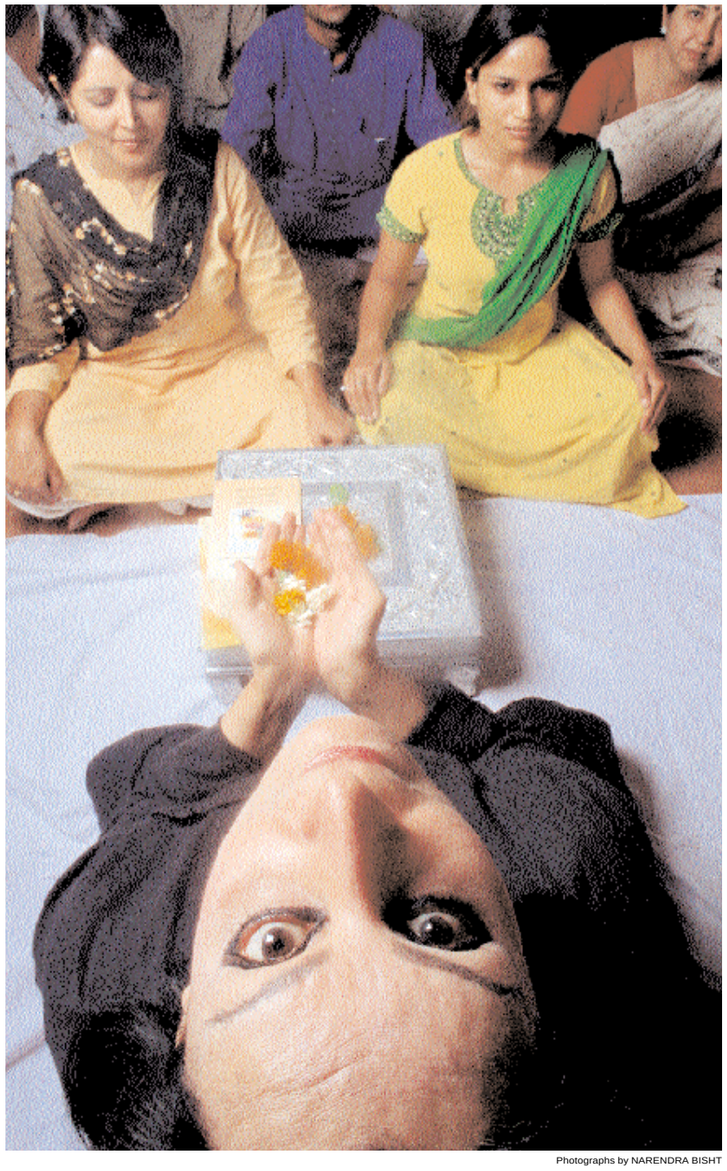
CHARMED CIRCLE

As more and more urban rationalists use black magic as a short cut to solving personal and professional problems, the chamber of secrets has only just opened



Photographs by NARENDRA BISHT

■ by Shefalee VASUDEV

THANK GOD, J.K. ROWLING doesn't live in India. With shamans, tantriks and astrologers round every corner, the creator of Harry Potter would have been reduced to dishing out *upayas* (solutions) and doing pujas for promotions, admissions, adulterous relationships, neutralising colleagues and warding off the evil eye. For this is the skein of troubles that leads many to believe in miracles. And as scores of educated, rational people explore the occult for quick fixes it shows how far they are prepared to go to acquire that latest model of car, a rich son-in-law, a male child, get rid of the husband's mistress or get even with a tyrannical boss.

Wish fulfilment, the most distracting activity of the human mind, seems to find resonance in the occult, no matter how dubious the miracle vendors. Take Sanyasini Debakanya of Kolkata, a tantrik who boasts that 100 people consult her every week. On sale is the Saraswati *kavach* (protective amulet) for children worried about their exams,

"Even Gandhi and Vivekananda explored the occult." MEENA OM (in black), a Delhi-based tantra gyani, says she has been bestowed with supernatural powers. "Tantra gyan is about knowledge, whereas tantra is hocus-pocus."

"We do not help people who seek revenge through black magic." Though 26-year-old ALI BABA's father, a seer revered by thousands, is dead, Delhi-based Ali claims the believers have multiplied. The queue of fancy cars outside the dargah validates his claim.

the *mangal kavach* for business problems, the *mahamrityunjaya kavach* for battling death, the *vashikaran* charm for warring couples or for making someone fall in love. "This is often used in *saas-bahu* disputes," says the sanyasini, who travels with an armed bodyguard. At Rs 3,000 to Rs 6,000, these amulets can only be "activated" by ostentatious yagnas. Nevertheless, buyers abound. Sanghamitra Bose, wife of Revlon's Kolkata branch manager, says the *mahamrityunjaya* amulet pulled her mother out of a coma and the Saraswati amulet helped her daughter during her board exams.

One "miracle" lures many into compulsive esoteric shopping. Delhi-based interior designer Payal Kapoor believes one cannot alter one's karma, but is completely bewitched by Acharya Manu Maharaj. He took her into her past lives, she claims, and told her "absolutely correct things" about her ancestors and her present life. Maharaj's chamber in Delhi is adorned with eight golden dice, four magnifying glasses, the Vedas and small brass pots with coconuts. "It is a miracle," says Ritu Gupta, a social worker. Given a photograph of her husband, Maharaj disclosed the details of his family, profession, personality, even his postal address. Gupta returned for more.

The inexplicable is too much to resist even for non-believers. "I can't explain it, but when I put a piece of paper in a small pot, it came out with an illegible handwriting in blue ink," says 48-year-old Bindu Dalmia, a Delhi socialite. "Guruji interpreted it for me and it did sound like my father," she admits.

"Maharaj told me absolutely correct things about my life." Interior designer PAYAL KAPOOR believes one cannot alter one's karma, but is bewitched by the Delhi tantrik.

A morbid fascination for corresponding with the dead and calling upon spirits using planchette boards has been around for years. But the occult is now being used to control personal and professional relationships. For some, emotional desperation propels these experiments. Rita Mehtani, a 29-year-old MNC executive in Mumbai, is tall, beautiful and intelligent and all she ever wanted was her married boss. She got him, or so she claims, through a tantrik puja using a strand of her boss' hair, vermillion and a betel nut in a leaf. Anil Gautam, a 36-year-old Delhi businessman, rationalises it as "all is fair in love and war". Hobbling on the feeble argument, Gautam recalls his war with his boss, "a domineering person who ruined my career". A vicious urge for revenge had him seeking an occultist. A fortnight later, claims Gautam, the boss was transferred to another department.

Being fantastic and escapist, magic is an irresistible prescription for those seeking short cuts to solutions of problems. Or easy thrills. Geetika Prahlad, a garment exporter, doesn't mind being called a BMW (black magic woman) and says she tries "everything". Despite cautionary notes by Ipsita Roy Chakraverti in her book *Beloved Witch* that spells should not be tried without a commitment to wicca, Prahlad tried one on a full-moon night. "I wore scarlet silk, took a silver token, put seven red roses in a silver bowl, stirred the water in a clockwise direction with a knife and chanted the spell thrice," she says. Meant for lovers, the spell worked on the man she had pursued for two years, claims Prahlad.

Chakraverti, who after the publication of her book was besieged by people seeking "help", is sceptical. "True magic combines an understanding of the human mind, soul and the power that is out there. But people don't bother about this aspect as spells and potions promise ready riches or love," she says.

Wishes for lucre or love abound, so does the business of occultists as they compete with -

PRACTICAL MAGIC

Some bizarre spells people have experimented with:

BETTER RELATIONS

Fast on a particular day of the week for four weeks. Tie a red dupatta to goddess Parvati's idol but avoid looking at Lord Shiva's idol. Serve tepid milk to a blind man in an earthen pot with a Re 1 coin in it.

LURE A WOMAN

Make a rag doll with features similar to the woman on whom the spell is being cast. Stuff a piece of paper with her name into the filling. Chant a mantra 108 times with the doll close to the heart and meditate on the face of the woman.

ENTICE A MAN

Scoop out the inside of the seed of a ripe mango and dry it. Cut it into 101 pieces and make a garland of them. At sunrise, sit on the banks of a river or a stream and recite a mantra 1,000 times.

REVENGE

Take hot ash from a burning cremation pyre and soak it in fish oil for seven days. Dry, grind and use the powder to put a tika on the photo of the person to be avenged. Chant the given mantra.

LOVE SPELL

On a full-moon night, in a closed room, take water, seven pink and six yellow roses in a crystal bowl. Wear a silken shift. Visualise the lover's face, speak out his name and pick a rose with the left hand. Touch it to your forehead, eyes and lips. Say the spell. Keep the rose under your pillow. Burn camphor in a brass bowl and add a folded piece of paper with your wish on it.

INDIA TODAY *does not vouch for the authenticity or efficacy of these spells culled from various sources.*

SOUMITRA GHOSH

"Tantra is not an art you can pick up in a classroom. It takes years of faith to become a proponent." Kolkata tantrik SANYASINI DEBAKANYA, who claims she meets 100 clients every week, gives charms for everything from curing illnesses to clearing exams.

psychotherapists in offering mechanisms to cope with life's vagaries. Says Ali Baba, a greenhorn at Delhi's Hazrat Moluddin Chisti dargah: "Ministers, doctors, professors, industrialists, even actors, come here." Many are willing to spend extensively on rituals involving rare, weird paraphernalia. In Mumbai, it costs a few thousand rupees for the basic *upayas*. For the complicated ones, the fee ranges from Rs 25,000 to Rs 60,000, with *vashikaran* spells costing up to Rs 65,000.

Writer Madhu Tandan, who interviewed hundreds of people on their dreams and "other worldly" experiences for her forthcoming book *Dialogues with Dreams*, says, "Most people are trapped in their needs and desires but the urge behind seeking out the esoteric is deeper." Anecdotal accounts of magical trysts are beguiling, but not all associate them with miracles. "Magic has to be understood as something that can open up one's intelligence," says writer Namita Gokhale, who claims she has experienced some psychic phenomena and many queer coincidences. "There is a synchronicity between the psychic and the intuitive," she adds.

Parveen Chopra, editor and publisher of *Life Positive* magazine who was militantly rational as a teenager, says a transcendental meditation course at 23 changed him. "Since then I have tried various systems and can vouch that there is something to it." Rationality and an attraction for the esoteric are linked, he says, because much of religion and occult sciences have plausible explanations.

THE argument that people do not want to be enslaved by an over-disciplined, scientific mind is acceptable. But it is countered by the fact that the people who dabble in magic seldom believe in it for long. Many also say that there is a backlash as spells and charms work a reverse curse. "Karma cannot be undone by proxy and there is a heavy price to be paid for flirting with Satan," says Dalmia. Besides, those who have dabbled in it admit that their fears, doubts and insecurities failed to vanish. The magical world may be temporarily enchanting but the real world teaches tough lessons. No wonder Planet Potter seems so beguiling.

—with Labonita Ghosh and Nidhi Taparia

Some names in the story have been changed