

Musician in UAE, magician with a cause in Kerala

P.K. Ummer Bhai teaches music at a school in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). But back home in Kerala he dons the robe of a magician to tell children the truth behind superstitions and black magic.

Ummer, who is based in the Umm al-Quwain emirate, has taken four months' leave to spend time in his native state, but he has no time to sit at home as he prepares to stage magic shows in the schools of Malappuram and Kozhikode.

'Sometimes tricksters tell a person that his neighbour has tried to poison him through black magic and even pretend to draw out the poison. But I show children how such a trick is performed,' Ummer told IANS here.

Ummer, who teaches the harmonium, keyboards and even vocals at a school in Umm al-Quwain, takes his role as a magician seriously and does not even take remuneration for his performances except the transport cost to the venue.

One magic show costs around Rs.1,500 to Rs.3,000, which he spends from his own pocket. 'This year I will be here for four months. I have plans to conduct 100 shows. This will cost more than Rs.150,000,' he says.

In the last nine years, he says, he has spent around Rs.1 million performing such shows. 'I have already covered 50 percent of the schools in Malappuram district. This year I am planning to concentrate on schools in Kozhikode district.'

Ummer, who is in his 40s, says schools are free to raise funds through his shows.

'I do not take any money for the shows. If any amount is collected, it is given back to the school authorities to buy books for the school library or to help poor students. If a show is organised to mobilise funds, children's parents are also encouraged to attend.'

He said the maximum he has raised from a show so far is Rs.35,000.

School officials where his programme is staged vouch that his programme is good even if it did not raise much funds. 'His programme was good. He did not take any money,' said a school principal in Malappuram district.

Ummer started learning magic after being tricked by a street magician and says he is happy that society at last seems to have turned against fake holy men or 'godmen' in Kerala.

The state witnessed widespread action against godmen after Santhosh Madhavan alias Swami Amrithachaithanya was arrested in Kochi May 13 for alleged rape and possession of narcotics and pornographic films.

'Piercing your tongue or cheek with a spear or walking over fire has got nothing to do with godliness. Anyone can do these things with practice. The problem arises when acts of magic are given the name of divinity,' he says.

'I have visited many of the fake holy men who now stand exposed. Visiting them as a devotee, I observed their activities and the next day I went and told them who I was. But I did not dare to speak out against them earlier, fearing adverse public reaction. It is only now that they have been exposed,' he says.

Ummer says it is the adulation and gratitude he gets that inspire him to carry on with his campaign.

'I got a lot of messages when I campaigned against 'pan' chewing. Some shopkeepers, after seeing my programme, told me they would stop selling pan. This is what inspires me,' he says.

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