

## This paanwala will spook superstitions out of you

A picture of a skull nestling over crossed bones welcomes you to 'Bhoot Tambul Gruh' (Ghost Paan House) in this north Gujarat town. Inside sits owner Ramukaka, who refuses to sell tobacco products and instead makes ayurvedic paans that are as legendary as the man himself.

Admittedly, the signboard and the aura that Ramukaka (Ramu uncle) has built around his shop is a bit unsettling, but it hasn't discouraged his 2,000-odd regular patrons and the tourists who flock to his paan shop.

Ask any of his customers about the oddity that overshadows Ramukaka's shop and pat comes the reply: 'No, it is not only his paans, it is his message to society at large that keeps Ramukaka a hot topic of discussion. He is against bad habits and deep-rooted superstitions and in that he minces no words.'

This unusual paan shop is located in a bylane called Mahalakshmi-no-Pado in Teen Darwaza - a well-known locality of Patan, some 140 km from Gujarat's main city Ahmedabad.

Those who visit him say Ramukaka is to paan what Patola is to saris. The famous Patola silk saris are still made today by a few master weavers in Patan.

According to a former dean of law faculty of Hemchandracharya North Gujarat University (HNGU) Mukundbhai Brahmakshatriya, an authority on the history of Patan, 'Ramukaka is a tourist delight like any famous place of our town. His small, unorthodox shop is a big draw.'

'Ramukaka has been waging a relentless war against superstition and the use of gutkha (chewing tobacco) and cigarettes by youngsters,' Brahmakshatriya told IANS.

Ramukaka celebrated the 31st anniversary of his shop at midnight Oct 27, breaking another myth.

'The shop came into existence some 30 years ago on Kalichaudash, a day before Diwali which is considered inauspicious when no one dares to open a new business. And three decades ago too he had inaugurated his shop at the odd time of midnight, only to show that superstition does not count when one has courage of conviction,' Brahmakshatriya said.

Ramukaka, now 54, says: 'I am against smoking, gutkha or any other stimulants. I tell youngsters not to become slaves of these habits. And when I begin to talk about one evil I also remind them about those unnatural fear of ghosts and the like that make us timid and self-defeating by nature.'

Making his philosophy clear, Ramukaka says: 'Be religious and not superstitious. You see I do not keep any idols of gods or goddesses in my shop. And yet, I am not an atheist. I am none the worse for it.'

According to Devubhai, who owns a cutlery shop close by: 'Ramukaka has studied up to only Class 7. All his three children, including a daughter, are well-educated. His daughter Minakshiben is an MSc and is doing her PhD, while his eldest son is a dentist and runs his own clinic and the youngest son is a pharmacist.'

He has some 2,000 regular customers who patronise him for his ayurvedic paan and his average earning daily even on a lean day is not less than Rs.400 with each paan costing Rs.4.

'Despite my paans being ayurvedic in nature they are not only popular in the town but are a hit in far-flung villages. They do not contain kattha (catechu), hard nut or tobacco,' Ramukaka says, adding: 'Besides ajwain (carom seeds), ajamet na phool (a variety of mint), karpur (camphor) and other ayurvedic ingredients, an in-house liquid formula is mixed to make the paans nourishing and healthy.'

'We regard Ramukaka as a social reformer who is working to eradicate deep-rooted superstitions. Such people are rare to come by in this age where society itself gives half a nod to smoking and stimulants that harm us dearly,' says Chapaksingh Bapu, a regular customer.

According to Brahmakshtriya: 'Ramu's contribution was acknowledged by the local people when he was felicitated by the Rotary Club of Patan in 1997 for his valuable contribution to society after he launched his anti-tobacco campaign.'

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