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Some godmen and religious cult leaders often have an exaggerated sense of their own importance: they sometimes end up believing what they tell their fanatic followers. In evading arrest for days together by making his supporters create a ring of protection around him in his ashram, the self-styled 'jagat guru' Sant Rampal not only showed utter disregard for the law of the land, but also supreme confidence in his ability to keep law enforcers at bay. Despite a court order calling for his arrest in a contempt case, the police struggled to get close to the godman in his ashram in Hisar. Intent to avoid a violent confrontation in the ashram, the police chose to play the waiting game, without trying to force their way past the crowd of Rampal supporters. But the water cannons, tear gas shells, and lathis of the police were met with gunfire, Molotov cocktails and acid pouches of the followers. Indeed, Sant Rampal seemed to be enjoying being at the centre of all this attention. In his calculations, the longer the stand-off between his followers and the police, the better it would be for his own popularity. The clashes with the police were designed to add inches to his larger-than-life image. Thus, instead of choosing the easier and more sensible option of surrendering to the police, the Sant put at risk the lives and limbs of his band of supporters.

Worryingly, five women and a child have died in the ashram during the stand-off. While the cause of the deaths is still under investigation, there is little doubt that the use of a human shield by the godman had unpleasant consequences. Fresh cases of waging war against the state filed against him are not going to deter the Sant or his group of blind followers who seem to thrive on controversies. Sant Rampal's rise to fame was not that of the usual godman. Claiming to be an incarnation of Kabir, the mystic poet-saint of 15th century India, Rampal rose to fame not only by preaching, but also by attacking other spiritual leaders and politicians and influential people. Indeed, his disdain for the law and for those in power seems to be part of the attraction for his followers. While the police did the right thing by exercising care and restraint in pushing back his supporters, the impression that the godman could defy the court and the law indefinitely gained ground. There could have been no resolution of the stand-off without the arrest of Sant Rampal. There was nothing to be gained by appealing to the Sant to see reason, and a peaceful end to this confrontation could never have been quick.

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