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## Superstition in India “An impediment to innovation and growth”

• Shagufa Naaz • Alisha Anand • Nandini Sinha  
• Ratna Priyadarshini

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Corresponding Author : Ratna Priyadarshini

**Abstract :** *Superstition is a pejorative term for any belief or the practice that is considered irrational. This belief or practice results from ignorance, fear of the unknown, trust in magic or charm, or a false conception of causation. Even in today's world when we have the ability of controlling and carrying out our works with the latest technologies, we often see people who have their fingers crossed, have their horoscopes read or knocking on wood for good luck. This proves that superstition still has strong hold over our lives.*

### Shagufa Naaz

B.A. III year, History (Hons.), Session: 2016-2019,  
Patna Women's College, Patna University, Patna,  
Bihar, India

### Alisha Anand

B.A. III year, History (Hons.), Session: 2016-2019,  
Patna Women's College, Patna University, Patna,  
Bihar, India

### Nandini Sinha

B.A. III year, History (Hons.), Session: 2016-2019,  
Patna Women's College, Patna University, Patna,  
Bihar, India

### Ratna Priyadarshini

Assistant Professor, Department of History,  
Patna Women's College, Bailey Road,  
Patna-800 001, Bihar, India  
E-mail : ratna.p.031989@gmail.com

According to American author Gretchen Rubin, “Superstition is the irrational belief that an object or behavior has the power to influence an outcome, when there is no logical connection between them. Most of us are not superstitious but most of us are a ‘*littlestitious*.’” Magic, witchcraft, and occultism are often referred to as superstitions. In general, superstitious practices are most common in situations involving a high degree of uncertainty. However, the question of what is or is not superstitious, is however relative. One person's religious belief can be a superstition for another's. Thus, Irish Statesman Edmund Burke has quoted, “Superstition is the religion of feeble mind.” It has been said fear is seen to be the root cause of the existence of superstition.

**Keywords:** Superstition, irrational, ignorance, witchcraft, occultism, fear.

### Introduction :

It is rightly said that superstition is the religion of feeble minds, it is a result of our fear, ignorance and our urge to achieve our goals without really working for it. Judith Viorst, an American author has said, “Superstition is foolish, childish, primitive and irrational- but how much does it cost you to knock on wood?” Even people who claim that they have no superstitious beliefs often do a few things they cannot explain. We have become so

habituated to some superstitions that they are hard to resist and easy to follow. Some people even tend to develop personal superstitions like a horse player may be convinced that black horses run well for him.

Sources of superstitious beliefs:

- (i) Leaders
- (ii) Elders
- (iii) Cultures
- (iv) Imaginative stories
- (v) Scholars
- (vi) Myths

Superstition in India is considered a widespread social problem. Superstitions are usually attributed to lack of education. But, in India educated people have also been observed following beliefs that may be considered superstitious. The beliefs and practices vary from region to region, with many regions having their own specific beliefs. The practices may range from harmless lemon and chilly totem for warding off evil eye to serious concerns like witch-burning. Some of these beliefs and practices are centuries old and are considered part of the tradition and religion. As a result, introduction of new prohibitory laws often face opposition.

It can be said that Indian beliefs and superstitions are passed down from generation to generation. However, it cannot be denied that some were based on scientific reasoning like Tulsi leaves should not be chewed it needs to be swallowed. The reason behind this is that though Tulsi leaves are healthy but they contain a little amount of Arsenic which can lead to degradation of enamel. Many Indians believe that one should not step out during an eclipse. The scientific reason behind this being solar eclipse can cause retinal burns or 'eclipse blindness'.

#### **Objectives:**

- To understand the origin of superstition in India.
- To highlight the role of various personalities in opening the mantle and Pandora of these beliefs.
- To draw attention towards the harm and backwardness it has created in our society.
- To point out important measures that need to be taken for changing the mindset of the people.

#### **Hypothesis:**

- Various forms of superstitious beliefs have been practiced in India since ancient times.
- Many people have misinterpreted it to create fear among people.
- Superstition was abolished by many prominent personalities of the past and the present and its opprobrium was carried out.
- Superstition has been the root cause behind many obnoxious crimes.

#### **Methodology:**

- This research project will be based on analysis of societal and historical content.
- The research will be based on primary as well as secondary data.
- Information from various sources such as books on superstition, internet, various magazines and other sources have been taken into consideration.
- Opinions of prominent professors, teachers, spiritual workers, psychiatrists, psychologists and their views on the topic will provide the subject a diverse objective.
- Our research will consist of three phases: Desk research, field work and analysis of the findings.

#### **Sampling number:**

Total survey number: we have calculated the survey on 150 people.

#### **Interviews:**

- **Dr. Ishita:** Department of Psychology, Patna Women's College.
- **Dr. Binda Singh:** Consultant Clinical Psychologist.
- **Balramjyotish:** Astrologer.

#### **Origin of superstition:**

It would not be wrong to say that superstitions have been around since man began to walk on two feet. For some people superstition rules their lives. They cannot go home unterrified after a black cat crosses their path. Hotels refuse to have a thirteenth floor or thirteenth room because people believe that the number 13 is unlucky.

But the question is where did superstitions first breathe life?

So, here we will explore the origins of certain superstitions. The word superstition is first used in English in the 15th century, modeled after an earlier French superstition. While the formation of the Latin word is clear from the verb *super – stare* “to stand over, stand upon; survive,” its original intended sense is less clear.

#### **Tracing the history in India:**

- **In ancient India :** During the ancient times belief in omens and superstitions was prevalent among people in all walks of life, although the intelligentsia did not favour it.

The Vedic cult saw a great development of the **sacrificial cult**. Most famous of them was the **Ashvamedha**, or horse sacrifice. The chief purpose of the sacrifice was the gratification of the gods in order to obtain boons from them. In the Later Vedic Age the duration of yajna or sacrifice is considerably extended lasting from twelve days to a year or more. The banning of such sacrifices by Asoka on humanitarian grounds gave rise to resistance from the orthodox. (A.L. Basham, 1954)

- **In medieval India :** The literature of the Early Medieval period provides concrete instances of superstitions holding their grip even on persons of high status of society.

In medieval times **the horoscope** was invariably drawn soon after a child’s birth.

**Akbar** not only followed the practice of drawing horoscopes, but also visited Fatehpur Sikri to see his new born son Salim in deference to the prevalent belief among the Hindus that “**whenever God after long expectation has bestowed an auspicious child, he be not produced before the honored father till after a long delay**” (Chopra, Puri and Das, 1974).

- **In modern India :** **Social rigidity and irrational social practices** became conspicuous features of eighteenth century India. With religions attaching more importance to external form than to inner reality, religious superstitions began to pervade over all aspects of social life. With the

increased number of superstitious practices the dominance of the priestly class also increased. The eighteenth century was an age of intolerant institutions and irrational customs.

Child marriage arose and with it a growing number of child-widows. Little girls, who while marrying knew nothing of their husbands became widows on the death of those unknown or even unseen persons. **Widows were considered to be inauspicious**. In the days of **Manusamhita** virgin widows were permitted to marry for second time. But gradually this was abandoned (Chopra, Puri and Das, 1974).

#### **Psychology behind superstition**

- Superstitious behaviour happens when we believe that one event causes another event without the involvement of any natural process. If you are like most of the people, you occasionally participate in superstitious thinking or behavior often without even realizing that you are doing it. The Psychology of superstition, calls magical thinking. But what is the psychology behind our magical thinking, and is it hurting or helping us? When does superstitious thinking go too far? Is it true that when we believe in things that we don’t understand, do we suffer? According to **Stuart Vyse** the author of ‘**Believing in Magic**’, “The dividing line is when you give some kind of magical significance to the ritual.” By this statement he means that not all rituals or beliefs are superstitions. For example, if an athlete develops a ritual before a game, something many coaches encourage, it may help to calm and focus him or her like repeating a mantra. This cannot be considered as a superstition. On the other hand, if he believes that tapping a ball a certain number of times makes you win the game, you have entered superstitious territory. Superstitions like counting the number of times you tap a ball are a sign of **obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)**. (www.webmd.com The psychology of superstition)

### Superstition and religion

- Religion is a great spiritual force. It empowers our minds and sustains us in our darkest days. Superstition has no such power. It makes us cowards. Superstitious men cannot achieve success in life because superstition breeds a defeatist mentality.
- Religion is a powerful liberating force. It broadens our outlook. It teaches us to be tolerant and sympathetic towards our friends and neighbours, superstition on the other hand makes us suspicious and narrow-minded.
- Religion sustains mankind in all ages. Even in an age of science people derive inspiration from religion. Science cannot destroy religion. Superstition flourishes only in dark ages. In the middle ages most of the people were steeped in superstitions. Superstition disappears in an age of reason. Science destroys superstitions.
- Religion includes a code of conduct. Superstitions are disjointed myths, and do not dictate morals. Throwing salt over your shoulder says nothing about what is good or right.

**Science behind superstition : Superstition is a blind belief and science is a proven fact.** Yes, there is considerable relation between science and superstition, as there are many scientific reasons behind some superstition. But on the other hand there are many contradictions to this statement because they are on a mutually conflicting terms. Because science involves rational and factual theses whereas superstition involves unreasonable beliefs.

#### Science behind some superstitious beliefs.

- Eat curd and sugar before heading out  
Superstition:- It is considered good luck.  
Science:- It has a cooling effect on the stomach and the sugar provides instant glucose.
- Twitching of the eye.  
Superstition:- It is bad luck or good luck depending on the eye.

Science:- Warning for tiredness or indicative for rest.

- Falling Hair

Superstition:- It will bring fight in a house

Science:- Hair may enter food which is harmful for health.

- Bathe after attending a funeral ceremony

Superstition:- To keep away negativity

Science: - As our ancestors did not have vaccines for small pox, hepatitis, and other deadly diseases.

**Beliefs related to menstruation :** India has always been a land of gods and goddesses. Almost all religions honor the power of procreation. Life exists because of this power of procreation, or fertility to be precise.

However, it cannot be denied that in every sphere of life there are customs which are forcefully imposed upon us. Indian society runs rampant with baseless beliefs that serve no purpose but to feed the superstitious minds of the individuals who live in constant fear. Menstruation is one such cause.

**Beliefs on menstruation that are prevalent in India :** There are many rules regarding menstruation which are just a by-product of the greed that this male dominated society harbors within themselves. Here are some of them:

- Women should not enter the kitchen while menstruating.
- Menstruating women cannot enter a temple.
- Menstruating women are impure and can spread their 'evil'.
- The red stain is synonymous with the sign of evil, impurity and repulsion.
- Menstruating women are not allowed to eat certain foods and perform everyday duties. (www.helloclue.com. 36 superstitions about periods from around the world)

**Superstition and sports :** Sports is commonly defined as an athletic activity or skill and involves a degree of competition, such as tennis or basketball. Some people like participating in various sports activities while others like watching it. In sports

superstition and ritual are widespread and a fairly common practice. In fact, for some players, these patterns may actually influence their success on the field. Many athletes believe that performing a specific ritual before competition improves their performance. These rituals range from clothes they wear to the foods they eat or drink; the warm-up they perform or even the music they listen too.

**Superstitions practiced in various sports are as follows:**

- In Cricket – Sachin Tendulkar and his left pad charm.
  - ViratKohli and his lucky pair of gloves.
- In Hockey – It is bad luck for hockey sticks to lie crossed.
- In Tennis – It is bad luck to hold two balls while serving.
- In Golf – Start only with odd numbered clubs.

**Impacts of superstition in india :** The number of superstitions and blind beliefs in India is very large as the Indian society is made of people belonging to various religion, culture, ethnic, linguistic and racial group. Many superstitious belief have been in the Indian society for such long time that they have become a habit. Superstitions have led to the carrying out of Human sacrifices, Witch-hunting, abuses and misuse by godmen and faith healers .The impact of superstition in India can be seen in todays time as well and some of its examples are as follows.

- Human sacrifices- human sacrifices are still prevalent and are practiced in many parts of India.
- Animal sacrifices – Many innocent animals are killed in the name of achieving one’s goals.
- Widow system – the impact of superstition is mostly on the widows because people have this superstition that they are unlucky and evil.
- Witch Hunting –Women are killed in the name of practicing witch craft and their murder is considered good for the society. It has become a very common practice now a days.

- Many crimes have emerged in India in the name of superstition, such as rapes, murder, defamation, loot etc.
- In the name of being connected with the supernatural many people claim to be godmen and commit various crimes in the name of superstition.

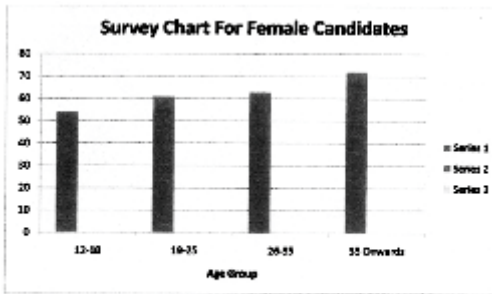
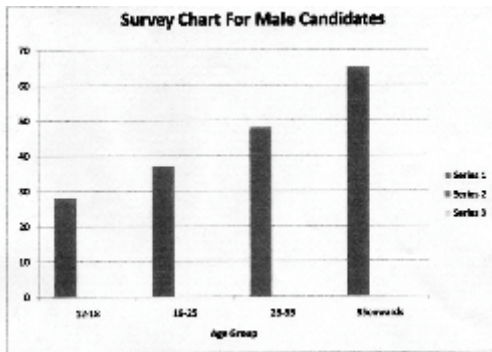
**Do we need an anti- superstition law?**

India is a land of religion, culture, tradition and diversity. All these aspects have a different belief system. Some belief systems can be explained with specific reasons while some are just practised for the sake of religion, culture, and tradition. Religion in our country acts like a pivot around which the lives of every Indian revolves. People often fail to understand the thin line existing between religion and superstition and this ignorance leads to various brutal crimes like human sacrifice, witch hunting and so on. We do have certain laws for some superstitious crimes but these are not implemented properly (The Hindu 24<sup>th</sup> November, 2017).

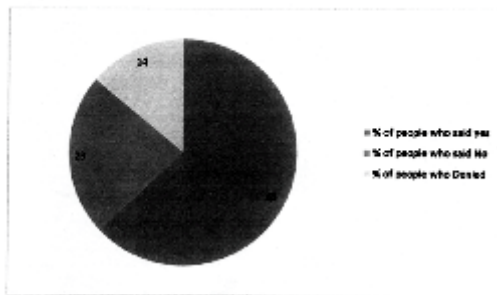
We need strict implementation of the existing laws and more new laws should be made. Its implementation should be done on very strict lines so that we can stop these superstitious practices effectively.

**Findings :**

- Human sacrifices and other types of sacrifices are not only prevalent in India but all across the world, and in other countries like Nepal, Nigeria, South Africa, Liberia, and Namibia (www.bustle.com on 21<sup>st</sup> September, 2018).
- It is observed that science too plays an important role in superstitions. The relations between science and superstition is as old as the ancient civilization.
- Superstition is basically the play of our minds. Fear and insecurities are the lead causes which makes a person turn towards superstition.



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### Suggestions :

- Classes should be held in schools to teach children about the wrong practices prevailing in society.
- Parents should also be made aware of the effects of certain beliefs that have a great impact on children's minds.
- Anti-superstition campaigns should be conducted in rural areas to help people develop a rational and practical mindset.
- The government should also make the existing superstition laws more strict and practiced. Strict punishments should also be granted to the people violating it. Apart from it new laws should also be built against superstition.

### Conclusion :

From the above explanation and observation, it is clear that superstition is any irrational belief which is caused by fear, weak personality and which compels the human mind to believe on superstitious things. Superstition exists due to ignorance of scientific facts and truths. The origin of superstition cannot be mentioned because it is associated with the origin of human kind. But from our conclusion it can be stated that, the word superstition is first used in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, modelled after an earlier "French superstition". Various forms of superstition is prevalent in the world. Superstition is not only confined to the uneducated section of the society but also to the well educated and developed sections. It is clear that superstition leads to the most adverse and serious ill effects as far as human civilization is concerned.

Superstition leads to various crimes and stunts civilizational growth. The effects of superstition is seen more among women and in those who are emotionally vulnerable. When the world is moving forward towards progress with the help of new technology, we are limiting ourselves by following superstitious beliefs. Therefore, superstition is a great hindrance to development.

We have come up with some ideas to make people aware of these things so that, the people will urge the future generations to correct path. Education is the best solution to this problem. Better public outreach programs, can erase superstition from the minds of people upto some extent and can bring in great changes that will make India of today and tomorrow, a better place to live.

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