



International Journal of Arts & Education Research

SUPERSTITIOUSNESS: THE SURVIVING, DEVASTATING AND EXAGGERATING ANCIENT DEMON

Rajvir Singh*¹

¹Asst. Prof, Dept. of Education, Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra (Haryana), India.

ABSTRACT

During the Age of Enlightenment, in 17th century, every society throughout the world, was moving from ignorance to awakening, that channelized many social reforms in the then crisis-ridden Indian society and hence many social evils were wiped out to some extent, but one major evil that is still surviving and putting hindrances in the path of our social and national development is – “SUPERSTITIOUSNESS”. The origin or basis of superstitions are not proven scientifically, but it is generally accepted that most of them originated during the earliest days of civilizations, when man started practicing them in order to deal with the unknown fears; and after that they were carried forward or got transmitted from one generation to the next. Superstitions are spread worldwide and not limited to a particular class, caste, creed, community or society; region, state, country or island; and not to a specific religion. These centuries’ old superstitions are rooted so deeply that they are now considered as part and parcel of our daily routine life, tradition, and culture. In the present era science and technology (S&T) is playing an effective and instrumental role in revolutionizing the life of man on this earth, but superstitiousness is still placing hindrances in India’s Mission of getting positioned herself among the top five global scientific powers by 2020. Not only in the S&T sector, superstitiousness is also putting obstacles in the paths of all types of developments of the individual, society and nation. Even today, after such enormous advancement and development, the instances of deadly superstitions being practiced in India are common, that reflects the dark side of India’s progressive society and also explicit further that the intensity of these superstitions are magnifying day- by-day. Now a days the weapon ‘education’ is also not proving instrumental in curbing this menace, so it is dire need of the time, that India should take some substantial steps immediately in order to free and save her citizens from the grip of this devastating and exaggerating demon and eradicate it totally from the Indian society to accomplish her Mission 2020.

INTRODUCTION

In late 17th century in Europe, a movement of intellectuals, challenged the then existing those ideas that were without any logical ground, and also those that were grounded on traditions, faiths, myths or misconceptions prevailing in the society. This phase generally referred as the Age of Enlightenment, was the phase of transition of society from ignorance to awakening, from authority to reason, from blind faith or following to logical thinking and deduction of inferences rationally. The works of eminent scholars, thinkers and philosophers revolutionized the world, as the new enlightened thoughts, ideas, concepts were replacing the prevailing old traditions, faiths, customs and irrational ideas and concepts by seeding the roots of science and technology. This Wave of Enlightenment also reached India, where the society was crisis-ridden at that time. Illiteracy, ignorance, poverty, superstitiousness and

other such social evils were dominating the Indian society. The Wave of Enlightenment and the illuminating thoughts of the then Indian thinkers, philosophers and social reformers, along with their constants efforts in this direction, tried to bring many social reforms in the society. Many social evils were targeted at that time and gotwiped out to some extent, but one major evil of the society that is still surviving and putting hindrances in the path of our social and national development is the – “SUPERSTITIOUSNESS”.

The term ‘Superstition’ was not well defined in the past (Irwin, 2007); some referred ‘superstitions’ as ‘irrational beliefs’; some said superstition incorporates an element of ‘magical causation’ (Frost et al., 1993); some considered them as ‘popular or socially shared beliefs’ (Jahoda, 1970); and some often synonym ‘superstitions’ with ‘paranormal beliefs’ (Vyse, 1997). Superstition contradicts the natural science and belief in supernatural causality – asserting that one event causes the other event to occur, without establishing any sort of natural process or link among the two events. The word ‘Superstition’ has been derived from the Latin word – “Superstitiō” – ‘dread of the supernatural’. According to Collins English Dictionary, ‘Superstition’ is an irrational belief usually founded on ignorance or fear and characterized by obsessive reverence for omens, charms etc.; a notion, act or ritual that derives from such beliefs; and any irrational belief, especially with regard to the unknown. Superstitious is a person who believe in superstition or one who is influenced partially or fully by superstition. A superstitious person shows ignorance of the laws of nature; not apply logic or reason; show faith in luck, magic, chance or miracle; believe that horror he felt or the bad luck/ phase he was facing was due to some paranormal or unnatural forces. A superstitious person cultivates irrational fears with him. Superstitiousness(n) - as per Nuttall’s Standard Dictionary of the English language (1914) by Nuttall&Austin, P., the quality of being superstitious is referred as ‘Superstitiousness’.

Some of the common superstitions are – Friday the 13th is considered as a source of ill fortune since the 19th century; getting a horseshoe brings good luck; an itchy palm means you will get money soon; keeping garlic with you, will protects you from evil spirits; if a black cat crosses your path, you will have a bad luck; some death may be caused, if a dog howls, and many more, the list is unending. These superstitions are thought to be thousands of years old and so the origin of many of them is difficult or impossible to be traced, but they have been recorded throughout written history around the world. These were presumably a feature of human society even before the advent of the written word (Frazer, 1911; Seligman, 1948/1975 as quoted by Irwin, 2007 in ‘The measurement of superstitiousness as a component of paranormal belief – some critical reflections’). These superstitions were there even during the period of early civilizations in the world. Practices of superstitious rituals in those early civilizations were recorded by many historians. Although the origin of some of these superstitions got traced readily, as -‘Friday, the 13th is in some way fateful’, arisen in 20th century (Hirschfelder, 2001). The origin or basis of these superstitions are not proven scientifically or explained on the basis of some solid and sound evidences; but they are generally associated with certain type of beliefs, attitudes prevailing in the societies existing at that time. Similarly their origin is also got associated with different types of beliefs, attitudes or customs in different societies or cultures; like the origin of the superstition – ‘A person who walked under a ladder would certainly face his own death by hanging’ is

associated to some societies long back in medieval times, where the ladder symbolized the gallows – a place where persons were hanged and so it was believed that a person who walked under a ladder would certainly face his own death by hanging. Another accepted origin of this same above stated superstition dates back to ancient Egypt, where it was believed that a ladder leaning against a wall made a triangular shape that symbolized a Pyramid; and so it was believed that ‘if someone walked under a ladder, then the powers of sacred pyramid was broken’, as Egyptians believed strongly in the powers of the Pyramids. Some of the recent beliefs or superstitions appeared to evolve from some older beliefs (Radford & Radford, 1948/ 1995 as quoted by Irwin, 2007).

It is generally accepted that most of these superstitions originated during the earliest days of civilizations, when man started practicing them in order to deal with the unknown fears or with the ignorance relating to certain phenomena; to ascribe chances, or to avoid or to control such misfortunes; or to enhance the probability or certainty of good luck. After that they were carried forward or got transmitted from one generation to the next. Now it is impossible to find even a single person who may be specified as ‘totally non-superstitious’. There are many sources that leads to the inception of these superstitions in the people and society, like ignorance, fear of unknown, myth, imaginative stories, imbibing from the customs/ traditions/ culture, following due to authority, illiteracy, learning from the elders in family or from peers or others in society etc. But to what extent these sources lead to the inception of superstition, varies from situation to situation and person to person, as the review of related literature reveals varied and contradictory results in this regard.

Superstitions are not limited to a particular class, caste, creed, community or society; not to a certain region, state, country or island; and not to a specific religion, but they are spread worldwide and hence are universal in their existence. Russian believes it a sign of good luck, if a bird defecates on you, your car or your property, and it may bring you richer; in China number ‘four’ is considered as unlucky, as in Chinese language, the word for ‘four’ rhymes with the word for ‘death’, so most buildings in China do not have fourth floor, although the number ‘eight’ is considered as luckiest number; Romans, Chinese, Africans, Indians and Greeks believes that breaking a mirror would bring bad luck; and so on. Whereas some superstitions are common among all, and are practiced throughout the world, like the ‘number 13 is considered as unlucky’ worldwide. Superstitions can be classified as religious, cultural and personal superstitions; or as superstitions related to astrology, curses, divination, luck, number, witchcraft, rain making rituals or objects believe to protect from evil etc.; or may be categorized in the name of the country in which these superstitions originated and dominated like superstitions of Ghana (Gris-gris – a voodoo amulet used to ward off evil spirits or bad luck), superstitions of Brazil (Carranca – a type of figurehead, if attached to a river craft, believed to protect the boatmen from the evil spirits of the river), superstitions of Japan (Okiagari-koboshi – a Japanese traditional doll, considered as a good luck charm and a symbol of perseverance and resilience), and so on. In India the list of such superstitions is unending – one can see ‘lemon-and-chilli totems’ here and there, generally used to ward off an evil eye; ‘Saturdays’ are generally considered as inauspicious; adding ‘one rupee’ to a gift sum like Rs.51/-, Rs.101/-, Rs.151/-, Rs.551/-... is considered auspicious as compared to Rs.50/-, Rs.100/-, Rs.150/-, Rs.550/-...; witch craft; kala-jadoo etc.

These superstitions are centuries old, hence are rooted deeply and are now considered as part and parcel of our daily routine life, part of our tradition, culture. They are there in almost all spheres our life, touching each and every aspect. One can find 'a superstition' generally associated with each and every activity, custom, ritual, ceremony, action, belief, any acceptance or negligence of man in his daily routine life. The faith in such superstitions is so deep, that people follow them or practice them with full dedication and determination, considering them as right and effective, neglecting all type rational, logical and scientific explanations. These superstitions may range from harmless observation or willing or acceptance of such beliefs to the deadly practices like witch-burning, etc. The killings in the name of tradition, custom, myth or superstition shows the dark side of India's progressive society. Lack of education is the main reason that most of the Indians are still made victims of many such social evils and old & out-dated conventions (Jayapalan, 2001).

In the present era Science and Technology (S&T) is playing an effective and instrumental role in revolutionizing the life of man on this earth, so it is accepted worldwide that S&T is the essential component for social and national development. Sensing this significant role of S&T, India has pronounced its Science Policy Resolution (SPR) long back in 1958. Since then India is striding high on the path of development, and in order to further accelerate this pace of development, India has declared 2010-20 as the "Decade of Innovation"; reframed Science and Technology Policy in 2013 (S&TP-2013) that stressed that national S&T Enterprise must now embrace S&T led Innovations (STI) as a driver for development, and aimed to position India among the top five global scientific powers by 2020 (Mission 2020). This Mission can only be realized when the message of science reach each and every individual of India, when scientific temper is promoted amongst all, when the people of India become scientifically aware, and our so called traditional and conservative society transform into a scientifically literate and scientifically cultured society by facilitating science communication, and attracting the enough talented and bright young minds for career in Science, Research and Innovation; because people with more knowledge and scientific temper are more inclined to reject superstitious beliefs (Barro&McCleary, 2002).

Superstitiousness is placing hindrances in the way of accomplishment of India's Mission 2020. Not only in the S&T sector, but superstitiousness is putting obstacles in all types of developments of the individual, society and nation. Superstitions may affect learning of the child indirectly at his initial stage; such social evils also create obstacles in the expansion of compulsory primary education (Jayapalan, 2001). Although after SPR-1958, India has made a tremendous progress in the area of S&T and acclaimed a proud position for herself in the present competitive world, yet even today also, after such enormous advancement and development, instances of deadly superstitions being practiced are common in India that elaborate the 'height of superstition in India', like – "five children poisoned to death by a couple in Maharashtra" (BBC News, 2010), as the couple believed that 'practicing this black magic would help them to conceive'. There is a very thin line between faith and superstition and that needs to be defined by law, so Government of India, from time to time tried to introduce prohibitory laws such as Drugs and Magic Remedies (Objectionable Advertisements) Act, 1954; Maharashtra Eradication of Blind Faith Bill; Anti-Witch Hunting Bill (Orissa), 2013; Anti-Superstition Bill of India (awaiting), but proved unfruitful due to

opposition from various strata of society to secure their vested interests. Expectations were there from 'education', as higher education leads to a significantly lower superstition (Torgler, 2003 & Peltzer, 2003), but now-a-days this weapon 'education' is also not proving instrumental in curbing this menace, as the studies and surveys in this area revealed that highly learned and educated people like scientists also observe and follow such superstitions (The recent first nation-wide web-based survey conducted by US-based Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture, covering 1100 scientists, all of them having a doctorate or equivalent degree, from 130 research or educational institutions and universities across the India, revealed that 40% of these scientist believed in supernatural powers, as they approved rituals for seeking religious endorsements before any specific assignment like space launch; 24% of them believed that 'holy people' can perform miracles), so there is a need to introspect and revamp the existing System of Education in the light of the devastation, the 'demon superstitiousness' is causing in India. Such instances at this stage of development and modernization also explicit that the intensity of these superstitions is magnifying day-by-day in the present time, so it is dire need of the time, that India should take some substantial steps immediately in order to free and save her citizens from the grip of this devastating and exaggerating demon and eradicate it totally from the Indian society to accomplish her Mission 2020.

REFERENCES

- Burns TW, O'Connor DJ, Stocklmayer SM. Science Communication: A contemporary definition. *Public Understanding of Science* 2003; 12: 183-202.
- David P. 25 Most popular superstitions around the world, 2013. Retrieved from List25.com/25-strangest-superstitions-ever/
- God save Indian science. *The Telegraph*, Calcutta, India. Retrieved from www.telegraphindia.com/1080610/jsp/nation/story_9389713.jsp
- How harmful are superstitions? *The Hindu*, 6th Sept., 2013. Retrieved from www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-in-school/how-harmful-are-superstitions/article5098036.
- Indian mob burns 'witches'. *BBC News*, 3rd July, 2003. Retrieved from news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south-asia/3040804.stm.
- Irwin JH. The measurement of superstitiousness as a component of paranormal belief – some critical reflections. *European Journal of Parapsychology* 2007; 22(2): 95-120.
- Jayapalan N. *Problems of Indian Education*. Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, New Delhi, 2001.
- Odisha passes Anti-Witch Hunting Bill. *First Post*, 5th Dec., 2013. Retrieved from www.firstpost.com/fwire/Odisha-passes-anti-witch-hunting-bill-1269729.html
- O'Sullivan J. *Book of Superstitious Stuff: Weird Happenings, Wacky Rites, Frightening Fears, Mysterious Myths & other Bizarre Beliefs*. Charlesbridge Publishing, Watertown, MA, 2010. Retrieved from books.google.co.in/books?id=kQAUTJS5frAC&source=gbs_navlinks_s

Science and Technology Policy, 2013. Retrieved from www.dst.gov.in/stsysindia/stp2013.htm#c12 Scientific Policy Resolution, 1958. Retrieved from www.dst.gov.in/stsysindia/spr1958.htm

Stockmayer SM, Gore MM, Bryant C. Science Communication in Theory and Practice. Kluwer Academic Publishers, The Netherlands, 2001. Superstition Bash: Common Superstitions. Retrieved from www.csicop.org/superstition/library/common-superstitions/

Superstition in India – from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. Retrieved from en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Superstition_in_India#cite_note-probEducation-3