

# Prevalence of Superstitions in Indian Society in 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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## Abstract

Most superstition from the past have been proven by science as unnecessary, ineffective or just plain silly but are still practiced by normal intelligent people today. Every country has its own localized take on superstitions. In this research, researcher reviews on prevalence of superstitions in Indian society in 21<sup>st</sup> century. There is much different kind of researches in the field of superstition and had different concepts related to the superstition. In this research, researchers separate the beliefs regarding superstitious activities into three categories i.e. common superstitious activities; death related superstitious activities and pregnancy and new-born related superstitious activities.

**Keywords:** Superstition, belief, prevalence, superstitious activities.

## Introduction

India is a large south Asian country with billions of people belonging to different caste and creed with different social and cultural background and socioeconomic class. Here, people have different views, beliefs, perception, and knowledge about different situations.<sup>[1]</sup>

Superstition in India is considered a widespread social problem. Superstition refers to any belief or practice which is explained by supernatural causality, and is in contradiction to modern science.<sup>[2]</sup> Some beliefs and practices, which are considered superstitious by some, may not be considered so by others. The gap, between what is superstitious and what is not, widens even more when considering the opinions of the general public and scientists.<sup>[3]</sup>

Superstitions are usually attributed to a lack of education.<sup>[4]</sup> But, in India educated people have also been observed following beliefs that may be considered superstitious.<sup>[5]</sup> The literacy rate of India, according to the 2011 census is at 74%.<sup>[6]</sup> The beliefs and practices vary from region to region, with many regions having their own specific beliefs.<sup>[7]</sup> The practices may range from harmless lemon-and-chilli totems for warding off evil eye <sup>[8]</sup> to serious concerns like witch-burning.<sup>[9]</sup> 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.<sup>[10][11]</sup>

Psychologists and anthropologists suggest that individuals who follow superstitious practices do so to cope with misfortune and uncertainty and to make sense of a complex world. Other research has suggested that superstitious beliefs can endure if the probability of them being exposed as untrue is low. If there is always some chance of a bad outcome when following superstition and some chance of a good outcome when not, an individual might never realize that it is untrue and continue to follow it.<sup>[12]</sup>

Even though the world has faced many changes and development in the field of science and technology, the belief of the people over superstitions still exists in the society.<sup>[11]</sup>

This study is an attempt to find out whether superstitious beliefs still play a crucial role in the belief pattern of educated and uneducated females and to find out up to which extent prevalence of these superstitions affects their lives.

## Materials and Method

The present descriptive cross-sectional survey was conducted at village Dadlana, Panipat, Haryana in the month of February, 2018. Sample consisted of 285 adult females residing in village Dadlana, Panipat selected by convenient sampling technique. The tools used for data collection consisted of socio-demographic profile and self-structured questionnaire to assess superstitions

and myths among subjects. Socio-demographic profile consisted of age, marital status, education and occupation of subjects. Self-structured questionnaire consisted of 30 questions pertaining to common myths prevalent in Indian rural community. Tools were validated by five experts from the field of nursing. Reliability was tested by split half method and Cronbach's alpha was found to be 0.838. Permission to conduct the study was taken from sarpanch of the Dadlana village and informed consent was taken from all subjects. Data was collected by interview method. Instructions were given to subjects to listen to statements and options read by researcher carefully and answer the most appropriate option according to them. Frequency and percentage were used for data analysis.

## Results

**Socio-Demographic Profile:** Socio-demographic profile of subjects showed that regarding age maximum subjects (36.8%) were in the age group of 26-35 years followed by >35-45 years (23.5%), 18-25 years (21.1%), >45-55 years (10.1%) and >55 years (8.1%). Regarding marital status, majority, i.e. 245 (86%) were married, 20 were unmarried, 2 were divorcee and 18 were widows. Education status showed that subjects were almost equally distributed in various categories i.e. maximum (25.6%) were educated up to primary level followed by equal number i.e. 20% educated up to secondary level and 20% had attained diploma or were graduates and above. Almost one-fourth of the subjects (25.3%) were illiterates. Majority of subjects were housewives (74.4%), a few (6%) were self-employed, 7.4% were doing private job and only two were having government job.

### Beliefs regarding common superstitious activities:

**(a) Common superstitious activities:** Reason stated by maximum subjects for using lemon and chillies outside house door was to reduce evil effects (84.6%), followed by good smell in the house (8%) and to encourage consumption (7.4%). Most common reason stated for not cutting nails after sunset was it brings bad luck (63.5%), followed by chance of getting hurt due to less light in evening (36.5%). People don't go near to peepal tree at night because 57.5% think there are ghosts around peepal tree, 20.7% don't go due to religious perspective, 15.4% think peepal tree releases carbon dioxide at

night and 6.4% simply don't go near peepal tree at night without any particular belief. Sweeping the floor in evening is not considered good by 80.7% as they think goddess Lakshmi will walk out of the house, 7.6% think something important may get swept away in the dark, 11.7% think it brings bad luck. People don't wash hair on certain days like tuesday and thursday as they consider it harmful for family members (63.5%), 29.1% think it annoys god and 7.4% do so to save water. There is a common practice of giving curd and sugar to a person before heading out for an important work. Majority of subjects (70.5%) believe it brings good luck, 20.3% believe it helps in accomplishing the desired task and 9.2% believe it keeps the person cool. Plastering floor with cow dung is believed to act as disinfectant (41.9%), 32.7% believe it keeps house cool in summer, 7.5% consider it cheap and 17.9% use it because they like its smell. Fallen hair around house are not considered good because they may enter inside the food with wind (55.8%), causes fight in the family (28.4%), brings bad luck in family (8.8%), can be misused by some people for evil works (7%). Most of the subjects consider falling of lizard on oneself not good as it brings bad luck (44.9%), 34% think it contaminates the person, 15.1% believe it brings good luck and 6% believe it brings diseases. Opening an umbrella inside the house is not considered good by 36.8% subjects as it poses danger to people and fragile objects nearby, 32.2% believe it promotes fights and 31% believe it brings bad luck. It is a usual practice to add one rupee coin to a gift of sum to someone. Maximum (77.7%) consider it a blessing for the person being gifted, 18.5% consider it a token of love, 10.2% consider it assures continuity of good luck and 3.7% consider it good on beginning of new cycle in someone's life. As an ancient tradition, Indians throw copper coins in holy rivers as it brings good fortune (71.2%), copper is essential element for body's well-being (16.8%), 9.4% believe it makes wishes come true and 2.6% do it to increase the water level. Applying sandal or kumkumtilak on forehead is considered auspicious before leaving for an important work as it is an important ritual in hindu tradition (52.9%), 32.6% each believe it helps in dealing stress, anxiety and it brings good fortune, 14.5% believe it has cooling effect on the skin. Sneezing by a person is not considered good while one is stepping out of a house or starting new work

as the person will face some problem according to 78.9% subjects and 21.1% believe it brings bad luck. It is not recommended to sleep with head facing north as it's not considered good for health (61.8%) and person may get bad dreams (38.2%). 64.9% subjects believe cat crossing the way brings bad luck, 15.8% wait for someone other to cross, 14.4% believe it's better to change route and 4.9% think cats have shiny eyes and heart starts beating fast. Greeting people with namaskar is considered a sign of paying respect (64.6%), 25.6% consider it their culture, 7.7% believe it activates pressure points and 2.1% believe it connects them with other persons. Women wear silver toenails after marriage as it is considered a tradition by 77.8%, 11.2% believe it strengthens the uterus and 11% consider it a fashion symbol. It is believed that pulling grey hair is not considered good as majority believe one will get three more for each single hair plucked (75.4%), it's painful (13.3%), the person will not age well (6.3%) and the person will eventually bald (5%). Women are not allowed in kitchen, temples and religious spots during menstruation as 62.1% subjects believe women are impure and unclean during that period, 24.2% believe it disappoints the god, 7.7% believe women become comparatively weak during that period and 6% believe women smell bad during menstrual cycle. (Table 1)

**(b) Death related superstitious activities:** Most of subjects believe one should bath after attending a funeral ceremony to protect from bad spirits (43.9%), to clean oneself (27.4%), to prevent infection (16.1%) and to feel fresh (12.6%). It is believed that the mourning family of a dead person should not cook food until kriya as it is considered harmful for family (39.3%), gives time to cope and

rest (29.8%), 16.8% believe there is spirit in the house and 14.1% consider it a sin. (Table 1)

**(c) Pregnancy and new-born related superstitious activities:** Pregnant women are not allowed to go out during eclipse to protect unborn baby from deformities (68%), to keep away from harmful UV rays (21.1%) and 10.9% believe it brings bad luck. Most people believe papaya should not be eaten during pregnancy as it is hot in nature (51.9%), it leads to miscarriage (38.2%), it is harmful for baby (6%) and it contains more vitamin C (3.9%). Ghee is considered healthy during pregnancy as it eases delivery (51.5%), promotes weight of baby (27%), promotes weight of mother (15.8%) and reduces risk of abortion (5.7%). Giving colostrum to new born baby is not a practice in many families as majority (68.1%) believe it reduces immunity of baby, 14% believe it's not healthy for baby, 11.9% consider it bad milk and 6% consider it impure. It is a practice to give sugar/honey to new born baby before first breastfeeding as 42.5% believe it make baby's life sweet, 36.8% believe it reduces chances of developing infections among new born and 20.7% believe it develops the same characteristics in the new born as that of person who gives sugar/honey to new born baby. New born baby is not bathed by 48.8% of subjects as it reduces temperature of new born, 24.6% believe it causes infection and 26.6% believe it brings bad luck. New born baby is not bathed immediately after delivery as it is not considered good for health (48.1%), it may cause fever (37.9%) and it brings bad luck (14%). New born baby's and mother's clothes should not be kept outside after sunset as majority (77.5%) think people may do black magic on the clothes, 13.3% think insects might stick to them and 9.2% believe it brings bad luck. (Table 1)

**Table 1: Maximum belief response for different superstitious activities (out of n=285)**

Superstitious activity	Maximum Response	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
<b>(a) Common superstitious activities</b>			
1. Use of lemon and chillies outside house door	To reduce the evil effects	241	84.6
2. Not cutting nails after sunset	Brings bad luck	181	63.5
3. Not going near peepal tree at night	People tree have ghosts around it	164	57.5
4. Not sweeping floor in evening	Goddess Lakshmi will walk out of house	230	80.7
5. Not washing hair on tuesday or thursday	Harmful for family members	181	63.5
6. Eating curd and sugar before heading out	Brings good luck	201	70.5%

**Cont... Table 1: Maximum belief response for different superstitious activities (out of n=285)**

7. Plastering floor with cow dung	Acts as disinfectant	91	41.9%
8. Fallen hair around house not considered good	May enter inside house and food with wind	159	55.8%
9. If lizard falls on a person	Brings bad luck	128	44.9%
10. Not opening umbrella inside house	Brings bad luck	104	36.8%
11. Adding one rupee coin to a gift of sum	It is a blessing	221	77.7%
12. Throwing copper coins in holy rivers	For good fortune	203	71.2%
13. Applying tilak on forehead before leaving for an important work	Brings good luck	151	52.9%
14. Sneezing while starting a new work or stepping out of house	Face some problems	225	78.9%
15. Not to sleep with head facing north	Not considered good for health	176	61.8%
16. Stopping for few minutes while cat crosses the path	Brings bad luck	185	64.9%
17. Greeting people with namaskar	Pays respect	184	64.6%
18. Women wearing silver toe rings after marriage	A tradition	175	77.8%
19. Pulling white hair of head	One will get three more	215	75.4%
20. Women not allowed to enter kitchen, temples during menstruation	Women are impure and unclean	177	62.1%
<b>(b) Death related superstitious activities</b>			
21. Taking bath after attending funeral	Protect from bad spirits	125	43.9%
22. Dead person's family doesn't cook food until kriya/path/ceremony	Harmful for family	112	39.3%
<b>(c) Pregnancy and new-born related superstitious activities</b>			
23. Pregnant women not allowed to go out during eclipse	Protect unborn baby from any deformities	194	68%
24. Not eating papaya during pregnancy	Hot in nature	148	51.9%
25. Consuming ghee during pregnancy	Eases delivery	147	51.5%
26. Not giving colostrum to new born	Reduces baby's immunity	194	68.1%
27. Giving sugar/honey to new born before breast-feeding	Makes baby's life sweet	121	42.5%
28. Not giving bath to new born baby	May lower baby's temperature	139	48.8%
29. Not bathing new born after delivery	Not good for health	137	48.1%
30. Not keeping new born and mother's clothes outside after sunset	Someone may do black magic	221	77.5%

## Discussion

Present study highlighted different superstitions and false beliefs followed by Indian society in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the research paper by Mehak Gupta Grover, it is concluded that God has made us with brains. Why don't we use our brains and the intellectual power which god has bestowed upon us? He created individuals with rational powers, which imposes upon them the duty to understand things, if not then they are on the verge of

superstitions.<sup>[13]</sup> In the other study by Hughes & French, 2002, belief in bad luck such as unlucky numbers or occurrences (such as breaking a mirror) can lead to anxiety which can in return lead to a reduction in performance and even stress and health problems. Wong and Yung, 2005 show that many Chinese carefully time their babies' birth year; they believe that the year of the dragon would bring their babies good fate.<sup>[14]</sup> Barbara Stoberock, Lysann Damisch and Thomas Mussweiler, University of Cologne (2010) decided to research the

effect of superstitions after watching athletes, perform meaningless behavior or rituals as part of their athletic routine. They found that it brings positive effect on them by improving their self-confidence.

In the present study researchers came across various meaningless superstitious activities practiced by a large percentage of people such as not giving colostrum to new born, not keeping newborn and mother's clothes outside after sunset, not sweeping floor in the evening. Some practices may have underlying scientific rational, but, blind strict belief of people have severe repercussions in the form of physical ailments, psychiatric disorders, family disputes. Beliefs have their own significance in Indian culture and traditions, but if practicing them is jeopardizing physical, mental, social health of a being, then there definitely needs to be a check.

Underlying these irrational beliefs are long-forgotten ways of thought that affect us still. However, we should not rely on luck, but instead practice an optimistic attitude and promote beliefs in internal locus of control. Education and public policies advocating directives on non-superstitions may be vital to promote healthy cognition on pregnancy, newborn and death beliefs. Doctors, nurses and hospice caregivers face deaths and dying patients from time to time. Their beliefs may be indirectly disseminated to patients. They may need to be sensitive on passing superstitious beliefs to patients. Death education should be reviewed and promote correct moral values among public.

The present study had few limitations as it was limited to a single village. Studies can be conducted at various villages in rural as well as urban areas. There are several researches in the field of psychology, which study positive and negative causes and effects of superstition on people. There are several theories proposed by different researchers about the development of superstition. This paper estimated the value of a particular type of superstition: belief of object etc. which can bring good or bad luck. Superstition should not be confused with tradition and culture. The only cure for unnecessary superstitions is education and knowledge.

**Conflict of Interest:** None

**Source of Funding:** None

**Ethical Clearance:** Obtained

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