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Category : [November 1994](#)

Published by Anonymous on Nov. 02, 1994

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"I'm not superstitious. But...I don't take chances either."

Skeptics believe in nothing, and simpletons in everything. In between, most of us manage to sort out mumbo-jumbo from faith or subtle knowing beyond the range of reason. A dangerously subjective word, superstition is defined as "a belief with no rational basis." Every religion has them: from the Christian who feels he can find divine guidance by turning randomly to a scriptural page to the tribal who carries eagle feathers for power and protection. Warding off evil, bringing good fortune, peering into the future are all part of every culture. Hindus have never been accused of superstitious impoverishment. What to believe about all that evil-eye and talisman stuff (What Hindu denies the efficacy of a protective rakhi)? Even in these times of run-away rationalism, rare is the soul who does not harbor a few irrational beliefs. It's a rich legacy. To explore it, Hinduism Today asked our two cantankerous correspondents to take sides once again-pro and con.

Silly Superstitions Stifle the Mind

By Dr. K.V. Bapa Rao

Superstition is the bane of religion. It saps the ratiocinative abilities of the individual and weakens society's will to confront and resolve its problems. Because it is fundamentally untenable, superstition, often confused with faith, ultimately undermines the latter. Far better it were to reject superstition and rely instead on a healthy skepticism.

Superstition is less about what is believed than in how that belief is entertained. Usually, a superstitious belief is a stubborn presumption about some

gross aspect of the physical world and is idiosyncratic in relation to the known body of scientific and observed knowledge regarding that particular aspect. Even compelling countervailing evidence leaves the belief unaltered. Thus, superstition is an enemy of reason, clear thought and unfettered action.

The evil consequences of a superstitious outlook are both numerous and obvious. A mind accustomed to superstition will have no framework for evaluating information. Thus, it can easily be perverted into accepting vicious and unfounded beliefs such as the bizarre notion that sex with a virgin is a cure for venereal disease. In some sections of society, animal and even human sacrifices to propitiate deities are common. Evidently, superstition extracts a stiff price!

A superstitious mind is clouded by fear. Every harmless rope is seen as a fearsome serpent come to stultify the intellect and paralyze the will. Many are the opportunities frittered away because the planetary conjunction was wrong, or because a widow or a solitary brahmin crossed one's path before a crucial business trip. Such fear-induced passivity can often be deadly. In living memory, people feared to treat smallpox as treatment was thought to anger the goddess, even when helpful medicine was available.

A superstition-ridden people becomes the natural prey for every charlatan and huckster that comes along, and many do. On the other hand, true spiritual masters will be unrecognizable among the glut of impostors who are indiscriminately appeased by a populace incapable of knowing better. On the material plane, such a society will be incapable of achieving a harmonious sense of direction in its ideas, utterances, institutions and activities.

Faith is entirely compatible with reason. Contrariwise, a faith that is associated with superstition will collapse with the first-chance glimmer of reason that might flash across a clouded mind. In our age of mass education, wholesale loss of faith purely by virtue of its association with untenable superstition has been a piteous reality. Both manifestations of this phenomenon—the despairing cynicism of mass culture on the one hand and the spiritual dead-end of reactionary zealotry on the other—represent the tragic consequences that superstition visits upon humans and humankind.

It is perfectly true that pure reason has its limitations. Equally, it is true that the spiritual journey begins with an attitude of faith and acceptance that may not seem rational at first glance. Even so, the evils of superstition are far too great for us to tolerate on the off-chance that it may lead to spiritual progress by accident. Our best bet is to found our faith on a Vivekananda-like skepticism that is as uncompromising as it is informed by openness and humility.

Dr. K.V. Bapa Rao is from Hyderabad, India and now lives in Los Angeles, USA. One of his major interests is ethics in Indian society.

Reason Resists Life's Revelations

By Rajeev Srinivasan

Man does not live by rationality alone. The capacity to wonder has been in us since the first hominid looked up at the stars and marveled. In many ways, superstition is part of our attempt to keep our intuitive right brains alive.

Superstition is defined as a belief that is inconsistent with the known laws of science or what is generally considered rational. But surely science has only scratched the surface of what is to be known. Perhaps inspiration is a momentary connection with the Ultimate Truth (by short-circuiting the tedium of science). Genius-which clearly exists-is part faith and part superstition. For example, Srinivasa Ramanujan, who could make extraordinary intuitive leaps in the field of mathematics, could only explain his ability as the blessing of the Goddess Namagiri. Does anybody have a "better" explanation?

Any technology that is advanced enough is indistinguishable from magic, and anything that is beyond one's immediate comprehension one has to take on faith. We all depend on experts to help us understand and deal with life. When we are superstitious, we merely trust unseen entities who we believe are providing us with omens-guidance in a somewhat cryptic form.

That brings us to the question of faith. The line between faith and superstition is very thin. We all know that miracles happen—that is, things that we could not rationally explain through science—such as an inexplicable recovery for a dying man. If he then tells you that he survived because he believed he would, is that faith or superstition?

"Superstition" also has a way of turning into "rational truth" to the chagrin of those who hitherto pooh-poohed it. An example is the practice in Bengal two-hundred years ago of inoculating children with pus from cowpox. The British, of course, banned this "barbaric" practice, only to reintroduce it later after it was "proved" as a smallpox remedy. Native Americans had a "superstition" of honoring the land and treating it gently. Two hundred years later, scientists have "discovered" that this was pretty smart after all. We have seen many such cases where science belatedly proves the validity of an earlier "superstition."

Indeed, scientists must be superstitious people to be capable of the necessary flights of fancy they embark upon. With their search for the bizarre charmed-quark, the Grand Unified Theory, etc., they are groping for answers. Given our imperfect knowledge about the world, it is likely that our proud "rational science" today will be the primitive laughingstock of tomorrow. For example, is cold fusion real or is it superstition? Who knows?

Astrology is taken to be the very epitome of superstition. But the same people who condemn astrology may swear by psychiatry, another extremely inexact "science." What is the difference? Relativity talks about the fabric of space-time. Why is it not possible that the particular space-time warp at conception or birth impacts an individual?

I admit that charlatans take advantage of simple gullibility and superstition. But let us remember that a mechanical, cold rationality can never induce a creative leap of the imagination. A little superstition we can live with if that is the price of poetry and romance.

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