



PERSPECTIVE

Superstitions — matters of the mind

Not even two weeks ago I entered a room and was met with six faces, some smiling, others looking at their papers and the rest giving me just a bit of a nod acknowledging the fact of my presence.

I smiled confidently, and broke the silence with a formal 'Good Morning' to the panel, to which the response was "What's your serial number?" and I could not answer because I was not meant to know that, however upon telling them my name, the person on the right said I was number 13!

Forgetting all about the formalities I quickly exclaimed my dismay, telling them how the number is unlucky and I felt unfortunate to have been assigned the number — the room lightened as the panelists heartily laughed at this, and I felt relaxed, thinking all the while, maybe 13 is not so bad after all!

Such superstitions and countless others have become a part of our daily lives, and most scholars on trying to understand the psychological aspects of the phenomenon resort to explaining it as a consequence for our very basic human need of rationality and control over life.

Think about it, especially if you have read 'The Secret' by Rhonda Byrne, you would always try to avoid bad energy and will your mind to radiate positive thought(s), hoping that the universe in turn will respond to your positivity. Following some of these superstitions, therefore, is simply one's way of making sure that good things come their way, and evil is warded off.

However, the superstitions we consciously or subconsciously or even unconsciously prescribe to, have a greater histori-

cal presence than we can sometimes even fathom, owing to the passage of time and the lost significance of certain rites of passage, and changes in the social and economic structures we dwell in today.

Charles Panati, author of "Extraordinary Origins of Everyday Things", explains, for example, that the idea behind opening an umbrella inside the house being considered bad luck might have originated from the fact that in the eighteenth century, when umbrellas became popular in England, they were large and had spokes at the edges, and so opening them inside the house — a relatively small space, could break things or even injure people!

While this is an exemplar of a practical situation, others are rooted in the ancient systems of faith and belief.

The Black cat for example, has been regarded for decades now as both a sign of bad luck in many nations such as the USA, while in others such as Japan, Britain and Ireland it is seen as a symbol of good luck. Ideas surrounding the black cat however, are generally negative, although in Egypt the Black cat has been both a revered and protected as a symbol of the Gods, with the spread of the Roman Empire, it subsequently became known as a form of Hecate — Goddess of the Underworld, who would transform into a cat when she entered the earthly dimensions. Another example of a superstition that is globally present is that of "Knocking on the wood" wherein a person would knock on the wood following a positive/optimistic remark. It is probable that this trend emerged from pagan beliefs, within which it was accepted that not only was the tree connected through its roots to Mother Earth herself, but spirits

and deities lived within, hence when somebody would touch a tree trunk they could be blessed, so as to retain the good luck they aspire to, or to be cleansed of misfortunes and bad luck.

After having lived 20 odd years of my life striving to be the individual who is rational and logical, who sees reasoning above all else, I realise that I am still captivated by the "What if", that is the possibility of a positive or negative outcome from having followed a superstition. These are tales that I have grown up with and I have become socialised in a certain manner.

I still listen for the 'tick-tick' of the lizards as I try to make a choice/take a decision; this superstition being quite particular to the Indian Sub-continent itself, arising from the legend of Khona, who is known far and wide even today owing to the story of her tongue being cut off by her husband upon the orders of her father-in-law owing to her superior astrological prowess which was putting him and his son on a lower status level.

The cut bit of her tongue, upon hitting the floor, is said to have been devoured by a lizard, and thus, if the lizard responds to a situation with a tick-tick which sounds like "thik, thik (right, right)", we are to accept it as Khona's response, which is the epitome of accuracy.

Whether or not these superstitions we follow have any particular scientific knowledge they emerge from is beyond the question here. As we have observed, they do have particular points of origination in the historical context and were likely to be relevant to the structure of the society that was in play based on a temporal reality, but this does not mean that the significance

cannot be interpreted otherwise.

In the twenty-first century, some of these superstitions have an impact on how one perceives themselves, and placing their faith in superstitions at times, such as wearing a lucky t-shirt, or crossing over your fingers might generate a confidence owing to the fact that the brain is 'signaled' that a situation is less uncertain and more controlled, by synchronously leaving things up to chance as you manipulate the factors that affect the chance.

The superstitions thus are what we use to fill in the gaps, and use to answer the many seemingly inexplicable incidents we might incur in our lifetime. Stuart Vyse, professor at Connecticut College, author of the book "Believing In Magic", and, a psychologist, explains that this subscription to superstitions is also part and parcel with Human Nature, wherein individuals like to have control over the matters of life, but sometimes fail to do so, can use these tendencies instead. This is why superstitions have been around for centuries, customised to be part of the language and traditions and lores of particular cultures with specific norms and values.

While superstitions are often defined to be 'non-scientific', or 'unintelligible', it is actually quite the opposite, because in our very psyche we do believe in certain things that help us cope and deal with everyday situations and relieve stress. Thus, writing off superstitions as necessarily silly, is indeed reductive, rather, we have to understand the degree to which we let these affect us negatively, as it has a lot to do with our mental health and in turn how we behave.

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