#HUMOUR

Of mechho bhoots, burnt matches, and other family superstitions

Superstitions were my Nanu bari's forte; my clan had a unique knack for instilling fear in us about everything under the sun, not only from the unknown but even from the ordinary. They kept planting shadows of dread in every order or rule we disobeyed.

I do not know if, in essence, superstition in my maternal family was less about irrational belief and more about social schooling — a storytelling strategy for how we were supposed to live, abiding by family norms.

My Nanu was an encyclopaedia of old wives' tales. I might be called out for saying so, but to me her every single fragment of folk wisdom was hilariously irritating: A lizard or crow's call before a journey, the sight of a broom, or an upturned slipper before leaving the house in the morning were all interpreted as signs of bad luck and impending danger.

Let me recount a few more of the rituals we endured to appease the spirits of our grandparent's vivid imagination, in case you think I am exaggerating.

For example, if you smelled someone frying fish, especially hilsa, you had to spit on your left hand; otherwise, the mythical "mechho bhoot", the infamous fish-loving ghost of Bengali folklore, would come and get you. And if you sent fish to someone's house, you had to stick a burnt match inside, so the smell of the doused fire kept the spirits away.

And there's my personal favourite: If you let your hair down and went on the rooftop at the exact strike of noon or dusk, you were most likely attracting bad spirits, because the timing coincides with their happy hour break. They would sit on your shoulder and take you for a spin!

I'm sure some of you have seen the Hindi movie Paheli, where a spirit falls in love with a beautiful new bride and takes the form of her husband. My family believed in such tales. So, if you were newly married, you had to carry garlic and a piece of iron to ward off these Shahrukh Khan lookalike spirits, totally disregarding the fact that the smell of garlic might shoo away the new husband too.



Moving on to pregnancy cautions, the list of dos and don'ts is endless — an eclipse, whether the sun or the moon casting its shadow, was said to be disastrous for your unborn child unless you stood straight and idle. If you cut fish at that hour, your child would be born with a cleft lip. If you threaded a needle, people said your child would be born with pierced ears. If you ate certain foods, some misfortune was bound to follow!

In essence, unless you lay completely flat on the bed or stand motionless, you were believed to be in danger.

Once the child is born, another round of make-believe rituals begins. The baby had to have a black kohl mark on its face so that the bad fairies would not cast a spell. Dimples, however, were said to be the imprints of fairies' touch on the baby's cheeks when they visited a beautiful child.

Walking under a tamarind tree was another danger. The number of evil spirits said to live there was uncountable. Why this lovely tree carries such a reputation still baffles me, yet people insist that beneath the tamarind's shade lurks either a cobra, or worse, a spirit disguised as a beautiful girl.

Then there was the "najar uthano" — a ritual of warding off the evil eye. When you looked too good for your own good, or when misfortune clung to you like a shadow, mothers believed that a sigh or a jealous gaze could curse you.

To ward it off, you had to gather a few perfectly straight dry red chillies, wrap them neatly in a betel leaf, perform some mumbo-jumbo ritual, and set the bundle on fire. But according to the superstition, if the smell drifted out, it meant a curse had already been cast upon you. If no smell emerged, you were considered safe.

How convenient. Now imagine burning a dry red chilli!

I always wondered why so many spirits were supposedly hanging around us. Didn't they have anything better to do?

I asked my mother about it many times, but she only shrugged and said she had seen her own father and mother do it. So now she did it too and expected me to carry it forward. But I think the family's bizarre, eccentric chain of inherited rituals snapped at my threshold, and I refused to pass them on.

And yet, in spite of that defiance, I remain superstitious too at some level, knocking on wood for luck, clinging to small charms as if they might tip fate in my favour, though I don't think it's working. Still, I keep at it.

And when I cook fish for my friends and send it over, I never forget to tuck in that burnt match, because somewhere deep inside, I'm still appeasing the ghosts of my childhood stories.

By RBR
Photo: Collected

#PERSPECTIVE

The fascinating science behind why we love horror stories

Getting scared out of your mind might sound unpleasant, but scientists call it recreational fear. Discover how your brain safely trickles feel-good chemicals like dopamine every time you read a haunting supernatural tale or watch a horror film.

Perhaps the elementary drive that makes the paranormal so popular amongst the masses is the fear factor itself. While ghost stories instil that feeling in people, it also comes with a fun factor, and this combination is what makes them so popular. Research even suggests that frightening experiences might help us prepare for how to deal with scary situations and unpleasant emotions while being in a safe environment.

Think about the ghost stories and horror movie experiences from your own life. You were at your home; you were safe. Your brain knew it was safe; at the same time, you were experiencing the terror. This safety of the environment is what makes it appealing to your brain.

IT'S IN OUR NATURE

There have been many studies regarding fear, both from neurological and sociological perspectives. One study found that the central amygdala of the brain harbours neurons that fuel pleasure-inducing behaviour. The central amygdala is also linked to fear. Which means getting scared and feeling good about it might be just biology: we are supposed to like the supernatural!

Good horror stories successfully trigger our fight-or-flight response, followed by a flood of adrenaline, endorphins, and



dopamine. Think of your most intense or scary memories. Remember how the hairs stood on end all over your body? Or that unique feeling of a chill running down your spine. While those are not ideally the best experiences, they can be quite enjoyable when you feel them for just a few seconds.

The brain can process your surroundings and conclude that the experience is not a genuine threat. Naturally, the accelerated heart rate, heavy breathing, and other physical reactions wear off very soon, and we enjoy a sense of intense relief.

In short, horror gives us a concoction of "feel-good chemicals".

There are a lot of people who enjoy gothic literature but hate scary movies as they rely heavily on gore, jump-scares and disturbing images. The use of imagination from literature itself is a great and enjoyable experience.

Besides, many people enjoy the feeling of accomplishment that comes from experiencing and overcoming that frightened feeling, not the fear itself. It's essentially the same emotion that drives people to climb mountains or take on risky adventures. Sure, the task itself is terrifying, but the feeling of accomplishment that comes afterwards makes it worth it.

THE CULTURE OF GHOST STORIES

It's not just the brain chemicals that drive our love for fear. Our nostalgia and culture also play a part. Think of your earliest memory surrounding the supernatural. What were you doing? You were probably in your childhood home, surrounded by siblings and cousins, and your parents or grandparents were narrating a story.

That's a precious childhood memory. When we think of ghost stories, these nostalgic memories make them more appealing.

Besides, many ghost stories had some sort of moral lesson to them, and the stories have been passed down from generation to generation. They are so embedded in our culture that we might as well call them traditions.

To make things more interesting, the curiosity of human beings in general also plays a great part in it. In some people, that curiosity is so strong that they will go to extreme lengths. Many people actually go to so-called "haunted houses" out of sheer curiosity. Ghost stories might just be a warm-up to them!

Of course, not everyone likes to be scared. Some people enjoy the cosy feeling of being wrapped in a blanket with a warm cup of coffee without any shred of the paranormal. But most people enjoy the thrill of ghost stories, even unwittingly.

So, which one are you?

By Ashif Ahmed Rudro
Photo: Collected