

# Why India is in the grip of superstitions

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For the past 25 years, I have been running in the morning, six days a week. Even when I travel, which I do often for work, I run. My estimate is that I have run in over 300 places in India. Finding a nice route is easy in small towns, but cities are a different matter. In cities, public spaces are virtually absent. We haven't bothered to build and nurture them. The roads are a mess in most places. But when I am home in Bengaluru, it is a pleasure to run. This is because the University of Agricultural Sciences, better known as Gandhi Krishi Vignan Kendra (GKVK), keeps the gates to its beautiful 1,600-acre campus open to the public. I wish more institutions would do the same across the country, creating more public spaces.

On any weekday morning, there are more than 200 people out walking or running in GKVK, most of them people like me, from outside GKVK. On weekends, these numbers swell to over 400. There are days on which the numbers drop to about half, say, the morning of Diwali. But on the morning of 22 July 2009, the drop was unprecedented. I ran for an hour at my usual time of 6am and saw only two people walking. After the first few minutes of running, seeing no one, where I was used to seeing scores, it occurred to me that I must have missed some crucial news—there must be a curfew.

But then it dawned on me that it was the day of the full solar eclipse. Only a partial eclipse was visible from Bengaluru, but it was a big event. Soon, I was able to test my hypothesis; there was another solar eclipse on 15 January 2010. Sure enough, there was the same sharp drop in the number of runners and walkers.

Life in India is suffused in superstition of various kinds, from the most bizarre to the innocuous. Everyone has their own stories and many their own superstitions. But I find the GKVK solar eclipse incident emblematic of a particularly curious aspect of superstitions in India.

The surrender to the superstition of malign influence of solar eclipses is remarkable when it happens in the precincts of a science university. To see the grip of superstition so dramatically displayed in this modern tech city, in a science university, is astonishing.

Does this have to do with our failure to separate religion and faith from belief in the supernatural? Or is this the result of shallow education, especially science education? Perhaps both. Scientific understanding can dispel superstitious and magical thinking without us losing our sense of wonder. Those who are deeply religious need not fear this. Religious life does not need magic and miracles to sustain itself. Instead, the very people

who should know better, those who study, teach or research science, seem to be equally in the grip of superstitions. The proportion of such people doesn't seem to be different from the general population.

Some of this behaviour is probably a version of Pascal's Wager—that is, respecting a superstition may be a minor inconvenience, but probably a worthwhile one just in case there is some truth to it. Even this line of thinking, however, betrays a kind of muddled thought, which ought not to be there in a life of science scholarship and teaching.

All this is unsurprising given the nature of our education. Our curricular objectives may be very worthy, but the reality of education in the vast majority of our institutions is that it is merely memorization of facts and procedures. This is true for humanities, social sciences and the physical sciences. It is also true of applied fields like engineering, medicine and law. For example, physics is reduced to facts, formulas and procedures, with no attempt at building conceptual understanding, let alone developing the capacities for application of the methods of science. And most important of all, the development and fostering of scientific temper is neglected entirely.

Our classrooms are embroiled in conflict, animated by the beliefs of the educator being vastly different from our educational goals. How effective can a science teacher, who is in the grip of unscientific thinking, be? If a teacher's superstitions are visible on their gem-laden fingers or in the black mark to avert the evil eye, what scientific temper can they foster? While I am emphasizing the matter of science in this piece, similar conflicts arise from the prejudices and beliefs of teachers about gender, caste, religion and more.

This is our messy sociocultural reality. It is not going to change overnight. And it won't change by heaping derision on such people. As with most matters, even in this, there is no substitute for reasoned public and private dialogue.

But, in addition, there must be explicit recognition of the responsibility of the educator to which they must be held accountable. Within the school or the college, their manifest behaviour must be in complete consonance with our educational goals—on the matter of scientific temper, and all our constitutional values—even if their personal values are conflicted. But sustainable resolution and real progress will happen when our teachers are transformed by their own education and their private and public lives are consistent with these intellectual and social values.

The same goes for our public figures, those in authority. If they live double lives full of belief in magic and the supernatural, then their actions will signal the same ambivalence. The full benefit of science and technology will never accrue to society till we reconcile this contradiction.

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