

Beliefs and Superstitions about COVID-19: Observations in India under Lockdown

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ABSTRACT

In the diverse social structure that characterizes India, misbeliefs and superstitions are still as active as in earlier days. Social media in particular has been swamped by hundreds of beliefs and superstitions during the COVID-19 pandemic, primarily 'infecting' digitally literate people who are unable to check the fake and unthinkingly pass on suspect messages going viral. Common people in general have been found wanting in responding to calls for greater awareness and necessary behavioural change towards adopting safe practices. Mainstream media in India has been largely playing its role in educating people about the pandemic and thereby contributing towards inculcating scientific temper, but more needs to be done. Five highly circulated superstitions and misbeliefs on social media about the coronavirus have figured in this observation, while public awareness campaigns like 'hoax busters' by Indian Scientists' Response to Covid-19 (ASRC) and 'Infodemic vis-a-vis Pandemic' by Dr. Anamika Ray Memorial Trust (ARMT) have been highlighted as the sort of responses that can be mounted to counter misinformation and superstitions.

KEYWORDS: Superstition, Beliefs, Misbeliefs, Faith, COVID-19, Scientific Temper, Media, Lockdown

Introduction

To make sense of life in all its uncertainties and find a way through them, there remains a propensity among many in India to believe the unbelievable. And in their living memory, life has seldom been more uncertain for a world in the throes of the novel coronavirus pandemic. Like several other countries, India too has been going through a tough time battling COVID-19 and

even the near future remains hazy. The Government of India has been proactive in its steps to meet this enormous challenge to public health, as well as in seeking to motivate the people and prepare them through appropriate behavioural changes.

The nature of the threat can be gauged from the fact that in just a week (till May 27, 2020), the number of people testing positive for COVID-19 has jumped from 1 lakh to over 1.5 lakh. Yet the Union Ministry of Health & Family Welfare has claimed that with active support of the people of the country, the governments (of the Union and the States) have been able to contain the spread of the coronavirus. However, the most important factor in preventing its spread is to empower citizens with the right information and taking precautions as per the advisories being issued by the Government (MyGov, 2020).

Unfortunately, a sea of misinformation and fake news has been generated over the pandemic; in particular, social media has been rife with misbeliefs and superstitions galore. In the diverse societal structure of India, such misbeliefs and superstitions still remain entrenched as in the earlier days. Whether it is the 'imported' superstition over number 13 or the hanging of lemons and chilies to ward off the evil eye, the country remains full of superstitions which can be noticed all around every day. Most people think nothing of stopping their vehicles suddenly on a busy road if a black cat happens to pass across.

In the time of pandemic with no antidote or vaccine in sight for COVID-19, along with the bleak outlook on livelihoods and the country's economy, the feeling of public helplessness has only increased. Given the poor state of public healthcare in under-resourced hospitals, it is difficult to estimate how many COVID-19 carriers were misdiagnosed or went un-diagnosed. Such a situation is ripe for misbeliefs and superstitions to run riot in the populace unless the authorities concerned take due care.

In the book *Superstition: Belief in the Age of Science*, author Robert L. Park (2008) explained the concept of faith and superstition: "...scientists use the word "faith" to express their confidence that the laws of nature will prevail, beginning with the law of cause and effect. The religious use of "faith" implies belief in a higher power that makes things happen independently

of a physical cause. This defines superstition. The two meanings of “faith” are thus not only different, they are exact opposites”. As the author makes it clear here, faith has two meanings and these are exactly opposite.

There is another terminology we need to discuss here, i.e. belief. Faith comes from trust and confidence. And this trust may come from our scientific explanation or religious belief. It is the same belief that is compounded by being integrated with everything we understand to be proven and true, thus acquiring the status of a truth, it is not trust. To have faith in something requires more than mere belief because faith is something we might always have to rely on. On the other hand, belief is the psychological state of mind where an individual holds a proposition to be true. Superstition is a similar state of belief in which an individual holds something to be true; however, the superstition does not necessarily need to relate to any other superstition for belief to occur. Psychologists who have investigated what role superstitions play, have found that they derive from the assumption that a connection exists between co-occurring, non-related events (Dagnall & Drinkwater, 2018).

How superstitions have gone viral

Numerous beliefs and superstitions have been circulating during this crisis and primarily 'infecting' afresh digitally literate people, who are unable to cross-check fake information, and instead blindly believe in forwarded messages going viral. Before discussing a few superstitions and beliefs about COVID-19 gone viral in India, let us keep in mind the ICT penetration in the country, which has a direct bearing on this issue.

Due to the Digital India initiative of the Union Government and the penetration of internet usage in the past few years, India's digital population numbered approximately 69 crore active users as of January 2020, which is the second largest internet market in the world. After demonetization in late 2016, digitization penetrated the country at a staggering rate, nearly 50 percent in 2019 (Diwanji, 2020). There is a tremendous growth of the digital market largely dominated by mobile phone internet users. India has currently about 63 crore active mobile

phone internet users — among them, 40 crore are also active on social media.

Social media can be considered as the primary carrier of superstitions in the unfolding pandemic crisis. Hundreds and thousands of such messages are made viral by unknown sources every day, which creates panic among the common people. Many people, including the new digitally literate, forward such messages not to harm anyone — rather, their intention is to help the near and dear ones. And the main game lies hidden underneath this misbelief. The superstitions and misbeliefs are not only created from the dark corners of the internet — many people known to be above board too are associated with this phenomenon. Another category of 'homo digitalis' is engaged in stimulating this trend because they make money out of it. Then there is the other category of prosumers who derive malicious pleasure by spreading these misbeliefs. Unfortunately, a section of social media beginners and newly digital literates carry such messages onward and disseminate these among a large population.

Discussion

Although hundreds of superstitions are viral in various social media platforms on COVID-19, only five most circulated superstitions and misbeliefs have been taken here for discussion.

The Number 9

On the tenth day of the first phase of the nationwide lockdown, Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi addressed the country in a short video message at 9 am. He requested the citizens to turn off lights for 9 minutes at 9 pm on April 5 and light a candle/earthen lamp/torch or the flashlight on mobile phones to mark the country's fight against COVID-19 (*ET Online*, 2020). The Prime Minister's message was about making a gesture of gratitude to coronavirus warriors and give them mental strength during the crisis. Such a move would also remind people they are not alone, and thereby help mitigate the sense of isolation a lockdown brings. But many people reacted on social media by arguing that lighting lamps is a very good gesture, because it creates an 'ethereal aura' that is very calming and effective — which is but a belief.

Many people also discovered a significance in the number 9. They sought to explain it 'scientifically' but ended up purveying superstition — about the timing of the PM's address at 9 am, his exhortation to the people to light lamps or flash light for 9 minutes at 9 pm on April 5 (5th day+ 4th month = 9), the address made after 9 days of beginning of lockdown, 9 days left from April 5th, 9 Planets, No. 9 = Mars (Mangal — the Planet of Light & Fire). There are a lot of nines in this paragraph, even for a coincidence! A former Head of the Indian Medical Association took to social media to “explain the science” behind the Prime Minister’s announcement – “[the announcement] is based on Yoga Vasistha, Chapter 6, the principle of collective consciousness. ...This collective consciousness has the power to heal the ACE2-receptors in our bodies. If we all think together that the coronavirus must not attach itself to our ACE2-receptors, then our collective consciousness will make sure this doesn't happen” (*The Wire Analysis*, 2020). Unfortunately, it ended up creating more confusion than elucidation. The fact remains there is no relevance of number 9 in killing the novel coronavirus.

Another belief that the virus will not survive in hot temperatures also created confusion. A social media post claimed quoting a scientist that lighting 130 candles together will increase temperature by 9 degrees. Such a claim is surely vague and unscientific. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has said: “From the evidence so far, Covid-19 can be transmitted in all areas, including areas with hot and humid weather. This means, you can catch coronavirus no matter how sunny or hot the weather is. Countries with hot weather have reported cases of Covid-19”.

The Number 9 claim sowed confusion even among astrologers, prompting one of them to point out: “Number 9 is the number of Planet Mars, but to get positive effect from this planet, the calculation of dates or doing something on date 9 or at 9 pm won't work. There is no magic in number 9 as claimed in the viral messages” (Kaur, 2020).

The question is how can lighting lamps help the fight against COVID-19? Dr Ananya Guha writes, “This is baffling, embattled as the whole world is in the crisis. This is also obfuscating science with superstition, when doctors and

healthcare workers are battling it out, when scientists are striving to cohere scientific methods to contain the virus in India and the world over, when the WHO is articulating preventive measures, when again the media is relentlessly propagating such measures for the benefit of the public” (Guha, 2020).

Thus, the Prime Minister's intention to rally the country behind COVID-19 warriors and simultaneously strengthen the mental health of all citizens — was misinterpreted (wilfully or otherwise) by a section who spread superstitions on social media.

Clapping and clanging utensils

On April 22, 2020, people across India voluntarily observed ‘Janata Curfew’ in an unprecedented manner. Three days earlier on March 19, the Prime Minister in a televised address to the nation, while calling upon citizens to stay home for 14 hours from 7 am, also urged them to boost the morale of the frontline warriors against COVID-19 such as doctors, nurses and emergency workers by appearing on their balconies and porches at 5 pm and clap for five minutes (Tiwari, 2020).

Ironically, there was a problem in reception and understanding which derailed the communication strategy — large numbers of people came out in noisy procession on to the streets at many places, throwing to the winds all precaution of maintaining physical distancing. They sang religious songs and clanged utensils to ‘throw out the novel coronavirus’ from the country. In this way, a call by the Prime Minister to prepare for the looming threat and boost the morale of health workers was totally misinterpreted by a large section to indulge in undesirable behaviour. Superstitious mindset and unscientific temper thus went against an important attempt at communication to bring about vital change in public behaviour.

Cow urine and dung

Several questions like — whether the virus causing COVID-19 was created in a lab, whether eating non-vegetarian food is risky, whether cow urine or cow dung can protect people from the virus or whether Indians have better immunity against coronavirus were the first few popular hoaxes that a group of

Indian scientists came together and busted as part of a joint effort to fight myths and misinformation about the disease (ARMT, 2020).

The hoax busting team is just one of several groups organised under the voluntary, pan-India effort — Indian Scientists' Response to COVID-19 (ISRC). An online platform which took shape by the end of March 2020, with more than 500 scientists from over 20 scientific and research institutes in the country, the initiative counts among its volunteers astrophysicists, animal behaviourists, computer scientists, mathematicians, engineers, chemists, biologists, doctors, public health researchers, science communicators, social scientists, journalists and others. Mindful of the 'social and democratic responsibility' of the scientific community in such a situation, both in terms of analysing the situation and reaching out to the public, the ISRC goals include analysing "all available data and support national, state and local governments for evidence-based action," in addition to verifying and communicating information.

Can cow urine or cow dung protect people from SARS-CoV-2, the novel coronavirus as named by the by the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses (ICTV)? While cow urine and cow dung might be used as components in some medicinal formulations, claiming their efficacy in curing COVID-19 is certainly far-fetched. No such statement has yet been made by any laboratory or scientist. But the damage is already being done at the level of common people through such unproven claims. In one incident, 50-year-old person from Hooghly, West Bengal, was held by the police after he was caught selling cow urine and dung as a cure for COVID-19 (Awasthi, 2020).

In another example of such superstition being openly purveyed, a self-styled godman has released videos in which he can be seen bathing in a mixture of cow urine and cow dung, while claiming that COVID-19 is a "venereal disease" requiring such a cure. Some of his devotees even organised a cow urine party, many of them later arrested by the police. In a news report, reacting to this incident, psychologist Dr Vipul Singh said that superstitions are no less dangerous than any disease.

Not just in Dehradun or New Delhi, in the State of West Bengal too a group organized a cow urine consumption event to protect people from the coronavirus (Mir, 2020). A Member of the Assam Legislative Assembly also claimed, “We all know that cow dung is very helpful. Likewise, when cow urine is sprayed, it purifies an area...I believe something similar could be done with ‘gaumutra’ and ‘gobar’ to cure coronavirus (Scroll, 2020).”

Gangajal (Water of the Ganges)

Surprisingly, during this pandemic some scientists too have been making claims about treatment, cure or protection from COVID-19. Some so-called activists too have been making similar claims which have doubtful scientific value. One such claim is that the water of holy river Ganges can cure COVID-19. Those making such a claim have referred to recent investigations by the CSIR-National Environmental Engineering and Research Institute, Nagpur in which it was found that the upper stretches of the Ganges contained 20-25 types of bacteriophages. Phages are viruses that specifically target bacteria and are also extremely strain-specific. This research had suggested that these phages may have anti-microbial properties and could potentially destroy bacteria such as *Mycobacterium streptococcus* and *Pseudomonas yersinia*. However, it is unclear whether phages, being viruses themselves, could have anti-viral properties (Singh, 2020). In fact, the Indian Council for Medical Research (ICMR) has politely turned down the request, citing the lack of “strong enough” evidence to support the theory that the “ninja virus” — bacteriophages is the term preferred by scientific minds — can fight the novel coronavirus (*The Telegraph*, 2020).

Religious performances

A country celebrated for its diversity down the ages, India is populated by thousands of groups practicing their faith, speaking their language, having their own ethnic traits, customs, beliefs, traditions, rituals, etc. The ongoing pandemic along with the disruption and uncertainty it has brought — has found reflection in this diversity as well. Many groups are performing their own rituals to protect their communities from this menace. It is

difficult even to cursorily mention how many such rituals are being performed across the country. Some people are performing special rituals using coconut shell with neem and placing these outside the village under neem trees to ward off evil spirits. They believe that by doing so, the coronavirus will not enter their village (DHNS, 2020).

A rural woman spoke about the rituals she was performing, which was published in a report. “I have received information from my relatives via WhatsApp which says you should light one diya each per sibling of yours. You are also supposed to pour that many buckets of water into a well. I have been doing this for my family,” she said, adding, “A few days ago, my sister who lives in Mumbai, called me and asked to search for a certain kind of hair. If you find it, then it belongs to Lord Hanuman. Now, we have to dip the hair in water and sprinkle it inside the entire home, as it will keep the coronavirus away. I tried to find the hair, but could not find one” (Sharma, 2020).

Some people believe the pandemic is a test by Allah of their faith, while some others assert that it is a sign of Allah's divine anger and punishment (Abderrahmani, 2020).

These are but a few examples of the superstitions and beliefs among thousands flooding social media during the ongoing crisis. Sometimes it is difficult to identify whether a message is based on superstition or some beliefs/misbeliefs or faith. But a scientific temperament would surely help to understand whether a message should be believed or avoided.

ARMT's #CheckTheFake campaign

On April 1, 2020, Dr. Anamika Ray Memorial Trust (ARMT) began an awareness campaign to highlight the mischief fake news can wreak during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. Fake news is an umbrella term that unifies three types of information disorder described by the Council of Europe — namely, misinformation, disinformation and mal-information. False or inaccurate information is 'misinformation' when deliberately created to deceive, and 'disinformation' when deliberately created to harm; on the other hand, mal-information is based on reality but deliberately used to inflict harm on a

person or an organization. Practically though, there is only a thin line separating these three terms (Dutta, 2020).

The campaign was centred upon two exclusive characters/protagonists, 'Pandemic' and 'Infodemic', which were featured in a series of cartoons carried by a host of media entities. The inspiration was taken from WHO's terminology of 'Infodemic' being as destructive as 'Pandemic' (Choudhury, 2020). But the ARMT research team went farther in its visualization of the two characters — 'Pandemic' was depicted as patient and confident, calmly aware of its power to destroy the world steadily one day or the other with no antidote discovered (Karmakar, 2020). In contrast, 'Infodemic' was shown to be overconfident, mischievous and stubborn, because of its conviction that its powers are greater (Agarwala, 2020). Why? Because 'Pandemic' only has the real world to overrun while 'Infodemic' has a stranglehold on the minds of people — the malevolent intention or irresponsibility of some in deceiving others, as well as utter gullibility of the others to be taken for a ride!

The misinformation highlighted in this campaign ranged from the #CoronaJihad hashtagged news items accusing Tablighi Jamaat members of wilfully spreading coronavirus, seafood as virus carrier, killing the virus by sipping warm water or swilling alcohol, cow dung and urine as cure for COVID-19, baneful effect of technology on immune systems thereby falling prey to coronavirus, newspapers and mosquitoes spreading the virus, nullification of government advisories with regressive mindset and inappropriate behaviour, etc.

The cartoons developed along a line which led to the conclusion that while a 'Pandemic' is destructive in terms of lives, it may still be containable in future, but 'Infodemic' is far deadlier. In the end, 'Infodemic' proves to be the dominant player because it is able to play with the minds of people, make them act irrationally, and be finally reduced to lives worse than death. It was gratifying indeed that in the 30 days during which the campaign was run, responses from readers/viewers indicated that they had absorbed this central message (ARMT, 2020). Hopefully, it made them aware about the threats posed to public health, while at the same time sensitizing them about the

overwhelming need to combat misinformation, misbeliefs and superstitions.

Conclusion

As already mentioned, India is a country with a rich variety of communities harbouring their own beliefs and superstitions. Seeking to bring about some common behavioural changes in such a diverse populace to fight a pandemic is a herculean task indeed. This can be gauged from the manner in which Prime Minister Narendra Modi's calls for public awareness, discipline and appreciation for COVID-19 warriors have been immediately turned into superstitions, irrational claims and conspiracy theories over hundreds of social media platforms. Subsequently, the Prime Minister has also urged people and organisations involved in social welfare to play a big role in countering superstitions and misinformation about coronavirus. In the name of belief, people have been seen gathering in places flouting social distancing norms. Hence there is a need to educate them about the importance of social distancing to check the spread of the deadly virus, he has said (PTI, 2020).

The Indian media also has a vital role to play in inculcating scientific temper among the common people during this crisis. Many media outlets are in fact doing so, disseminating much crucial information about the nature of this threat to public health and government advisories on safe practices. The mainstream media, although mostly controlled by large, profit-minded corporations in the absence of restrictions on cross-media ownership, has vested priorities in seeking economic growth. This self-interest is not necessarily a bad thing, so long as the focus remains on helping to bring the country safely out of the pandemic, restore livelihoods taken away by the lockdown as well as initiate fruitful discourse on opening new avenues for gainful employment, and generate public confidence that the country's economy will soar in the near future.

But social media is another matter. In the absence of any gatekeeping mechanism worth the name, all kinds of negative and regressive content purveyed on social media platforms have aggravated the crisis. To take forward the cause of rational thinking and dissemination of scientific temper, the government

should encourage public and private organisations involved in healthcare, science and risk communication. It should also bring forth new laws and regulations to help eradicate superstitions during such crisis situations for the benefit of India's newly digitally literate society. Aiming to gain her rightful status in the 21st century, India can ill afford such regressive forces misleading people and playing havoc in an increasingly digital, artificially intelligent ecosystem.

In this context, it must not be forgotten that promoting rational and scientific temper in Indian society has been as much a leitmotif running through the Indian Constitution as it was of the country's leadership at the time of independence in 1947. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, espoused scientific temper for life itself and solving the problems thrown up by life. In his *Discovery of India*, he wrote about scientific temper: "...the adventurous and yet critical temper of science, the search for truth and new knowledge, the refusal to accept anything without testing and trial, the capacity to change previous conclusions in the face of new evidence, the reliance on observed fact and not on pre-conceived theory, the hard discipline of the mind..." (Nehru, 1946). It is this stress on rationality and scientific attitude that saw the newly drafted Constitution in 1950 banning outright regressive social practices such as untouchability and sati. In the Directive Principles of State Policy, the Constitution has put the onus on the government of the day to work for improving the lives of citizens in different ways — like guaranteeing free and compulsory education to all citizens (now a fundamental right since 2009), raising nutrition levels and improving public health, or organizing vital activities like agriculture and animal husbandry "on modern and scientific lines" (Basu, 2011).

And we, the people of India, cannot shirk our responsibility in imbibing scientific temper either. Among the fundamental duties laid down by our Constitution is Article 51A(h) which requires all citizens "to develop the scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform". Let this pandemic with all its gravity remind us of this sacred duty, while strengthening our collective resolve to filter out, debunk and reject misbeliefs and superstitions which let us all down and set the country back.

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