UNIT 8 : SUPERSTITIONS

UNIT STRUCTURE

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8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to-

- understand the meaning of Superstition
- explain the causes and effects of Superstition
- discuss the relevance of Superstition in the present times

8.2 INTRODUCTION

Superstition refers to the belief or faith in the unknown or inexplicable. It is mostly a fear towards things that cannot be explained by normal perception and logic. Every society of the world has superstitious beliefs. Again, there are certain superstitious beliefs that are common to societies around the world. Therefore, it is seen that superstition is a practice that is common to all societies and is, hence, a part of the belief systems. Superstition is a part of the traditions and customs of a society and plays a major role in forming the attitude of the people towards various issues. Superstitions are known to thrive under the guise of old wives' tales, legends,

and traditions. They may involve animals, graveyards, ghosts, inanimate objects, or even other people.

8.3 PRACTICE OF SUPERSTITION

Practices of superstition are varied across societies. The genesis of superstitious beliefs lies in culture and religion to a very great extent. Superstitions that are an offshoot of cultural tradition are enormous in their variety. People across different societies, and across all times, have held, seriously or half-seriously, irrational beliefs concerning methods of warding off ill or bringing good, foretelling the future, and healing or preventing sickness or accident. A few specific folk traditions, such as belief in the evil eye or in the power of amulets, have been found in most periods of history and in most parts of the world. Certain beliefs may be limited to a nation, region, or village, to a family, or to a social or vocational group.Superstitious beliefs may thus have its origin in religion, cultural or may be the extension of personal belief systems.

Superstitious beliefs are part of every religion. Often one person's religion is another person's superstition: Constantine called paganism superstition; Tacitus called Christianity a pernicious superstition; all religious beliefs and practices may seem superstitious to the person without religion. Most of the times cultural and religious basis of superstition are intertwined.

People also develop personal superstitions: a certain colour is taken to be lucky for particular day of the week and people wear clothes of the colour so that they benefit from the same; again, school children consider a pen to be lucky if a good examination paper is written on that day by using the certain pen; fasting on certain days of the week are further considered auspicious for fulfillment of various wishes; similarly days of the week are associated with obeisance to different Gods by the Hindus et al.

Superstition has been deeply influential in history. Even in so-called modern times, when objective evidence is highly valued, there are few people who would not, if pressed, admit to cherishing secretly one or two irrational beliefs or superstitions.

ACTIVITY- 1



Have you ever held any superstitious beliefs but no longer subscribe to them? If so, List them and write what you think about them now.

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8.4 SUPERSTITION AND INDIAN SOCIETY

It must be clear to you by now that every society professes some kind of superstitious beliefs and the Indian society is no different. The Indian society is distinguished by its system, structure and functions. Superstitious beliefs in India are a part of the customs, traditions, values and principles of the social milieu.

In the context of the Indian society, superstitions are a commonly witnessed phenomenon. It can be witnessed in every aspect of the lives of the people and can be seen almost everywhere from people's professional to their domestic lives. Most of the superstitious beliefs are based on the fact that the effects of evil spirits need to be warded off as they interfere with the functioning of the day to day activities. Some of these beliefs were based on scientific reasoning but with the passing of time and over the ages the beliefs became irrational and illogical as they became more rigid and refused to follow any reason. Thus, the beliefs lost their general utilitarian purpose and became an unnecessary burden on the people. Today, many such beliefs have become so ingrained in the lives of people that ignoring them is considered a blasphemy.

Superstitions have come to be linked with the auspicious and the inauspicious. It is the fear of retributions from the unknown that have instilled dread among the believers. Such beliefs are rife in society and are commonly observed across different population groups whether at homes, offices,

public gatherings et al. However, the beliefs now considered blatant and unreasonable with their larger objective to protecting people from the wrath of evil spirits were all not bad. Some of them had the greater purpose of bringing consciousness of the people to light and were based on scientific reasoning. Srimanta Sankaradeva, the saint-philosopher brought order to the then chaotic Assamese society by encouraging some such beliefs like isolation of a woman during menstrual cycles which was done to give rest to the women of the household during that period, tabooing cleaning or sweeping to the premises during nightfall to avoid haphazardous work in minimal light etc. With the passage of time, the reasoning and logic that were part of the beliefs were slowly forgotten and today they appear to have no substance or truth. Again, many of the belief systems have been highly distorted and have assumed new and potentially absurd proportions.

Similarly, other auspicious signs could be cawing of a black crow in one's house, as it forecasts the arrival of guests. Seeing a peacock on a journey is also considered lucky, but hearing its shrill sound is bad. Indians feel happy if a sparrow builds a nest in a new house because it signals good fortune. A very old belief is that if you kill a cat, you have to offer one in gold to a priest. This belief or superstition was concocted by the priests to protect the cats, which are useful in killing the rats in people's houses.

Thus, Indians often consult astrological charts to fix an auspicious time for important events. Again, it is considered lucky to see cereals, paddy, cotton, hay or a newlywed before embarking on a journey. In India, you may also come across or hear about people who interpret other's dreams. Beliefs and superstitions govern the mundane daily life of Indians. For example, Tuesday is not an auspicious day for shaving and Thursday is a bad day for washing one's hair and et al.

Superstitious beliefs are thus ingrained in the social ethos of India. However, contrary to popular perception that Indian society is rigid and immutable, it has been subject to continuous change. This change has been evident in various elements of society. Institutions like family and marriage along with the caste system have witnessed widespread changes.

These changes have also triggered changes in customs and traditions and in turn affected the superstitious beliefs.

Common sense evidently is conspicuously absent from superstitious beliefs as practiced in India. 'Common sense' and 'common belief' differ in that common beliefs may or may not contain within them superstitious beliefs depending on the level of consciousness whereas common sense essentially relates to reason, logic and argument and is a healthier tradition. Primitive society and culture followed customs, ritual and traditional practices which most of the time are devoid of reason and logic..

As stated before, like most of the societies of the world, superstition in the context of the Indian society is a manifestation of the cultural and religious practices. Hence, practices like bathing, opening of footwear before entering places of worship are seldom questioned given their universal acceptance. Many of the superstitious beliefs are dysfunctional for the society as they bring about differentiation between different groups, classes and communities of people. The caste system which is inimical to the functioning of the Indian society is one such practice that differentiates between people of different caste orientations. The so-called upper classes, that is, the Brahmins claim to be superior to the other castes with the Sudras occupying the lowest position in this system of social hierarchy. Until the very recent past, the lines drawn between these castes were rigid and non-permeable. The caste differences were amplified by superstitious beliefs of purity and pollution whereby the superior castes were polluted upon being touched by the inferior caste and hence to maintain the purity of the former, the latter had to be kept at a certain physical distance.

The superstitious beliefs in India are more concentrated upon certain groups of people who come to be victimized under its pretext. Women in particular are associated with many superstitions and taboos.For example, menstruating women are considered impure and widows are considered inauspicious. Women, are accused of witchcraft and are attacked, and occasionally killed on mere suspicion. The belief in black magic even today finds many supporters and this signifies the strength of the concept of superstition.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS- 1

1. Fill in the blanks

(a) The genesis of superstitious beliefs lies in _____ and _____.

(b) Constantine called _____ superstition.

2. State True or False

(a) Women in India, in particular are associated with many superstitions and taboos.

(b) Many of the superstitious beliefs are functional for the society as they bring about differentiation between different groups, classes and communities of people

8.5 CAUSES OF SUPERSTITION

Superstition thrives on fear and emerges from ignorance. Superstition has sustained through the ages as it is a legacy of our ancient civilization. Ironically, superstitious beliefs have sustained even in this age of science and modern education.

Ignorance leads to many imaginative and illogical perceptions. An ignorant man cannot understand the cause of lighting and thunder. He invents an imaginary explanation for the happening. He thinks that some unseen power is behind these natural events. People believe in ghosts, spirits and in witch-craft. They think that the power of mantras controls everything. So ignorance is the cause of superstition..

However, sometimes superstitious beliefs are given support by the learned and educated persons. A reputed Hindu philosopher may staunchly object to his daughter's marriage to a boy of another caste or religion.People can seldom overcome the fear of retribution from disrespecting taboos and belief systems.

Causes of Superstition:

- Lack of education makes people unaware about the scientific reasons behind an event.

- People believe that superstitions have ancient meanings, so they should adhere to these because wise forefathers have developed them.
- Traditions and culture are passed down to generations without transferring the logic behind them. Some days are auspicious and others are not. This cuts across religious lines.
- Religious texts and scriptures are said to be the source of many superstitious beliefs
- Superstitious beliefs are used as a cure for illness and such cures thrive on the poverty of the people who remain deprived from costly medical treatment.
- As part of the customs and traditions, superstitious beliefs too are arbitrarily inherited. Children always assume the belief and social practices of their parents. Once an individual is oriented into a particular set of beliefs from childhood, it is unlikely that he or she will deviate from them. Inheritance generally overrides early social factors like schools etc and is one of the most significant factors that uphold identity of an individual and wherein the role of parents is stronger than peer influence.
- Since customs, traditions, religion etc are functional to the society, it is imperative that superstition is a significant component of society at large. Associating with a group of like-minded people always makes one feel empowered and worthy. Hence, the functional purpose of religion, culture and traditions can be explained in its ability to combat loneliness, helps them fight impulses of addition like drugs, alcohol et al. and encourages them to cope with anxiety or depression.
- Moralizing conforming to religious beliefs and superstitions entail conforming to a moral standard.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS- II

1. Outline any three causes of superstitious beliefs.

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2. What are the problems arising out of superstitious beliefs.

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8.6 EFFECT OF SUPERSTITION ON SOCIETY

Each race, religion, caste group has its own values and belief systems. The effects of superstitious beliefs on the society are infinite as every person professes some or the other belief. Such beliefs, however obscure and ridiculous, elicit faith and following from the people who are always guided by their social roles and functions. Superstitious beliefs have sustained through the ages and with every passing periods of historical time these beliefs have assumed new character. However, it cannot be ignored that till date superstitious beliefs are a very important part of the culture and tradition of every society as has been stated above. As legacies of every civilization superstitious beliefs are inherited by the subsequent generations.Education was thought to be instrumental in wiping out superstition yet it has been a fact that superstitious beliefs still sustain with good amount of faith from the people.

As seen from the discussion above, superstitious beliefs endure due to various factors. One such important reason for the presence of such beliefs is the recurring incidences of failure of proving these so-called beliefs and faith as untrue. An example of such fact is the repeated incidences of witch hunting where innocent people are openly persecuted by the public on the mere doubt of the practice of witchcraft. Sadly, there are few attempts to bring awareness among the educationally marginalized

about the futility of such faith. It is generally seen that if a person is told that if someone sneezes when he leaves his house then his day would be unlucky and it so happens that when one day someone does sneeze as he leaves for work and that day he does not get any work, he is bound to start believing in the superstition. Hence, it is seen that such beliefs become ingrained in the consciousness of the people in order avoid the bad consequences. Psychologists and anthropologists are of the opinion that superstitious practices are followed by people to cope with misfortune and uncertainty and to survive well in the complicated world. Superstition has potential impact on social and economic development of society.

The consequences of superstition can be outlined as below :

- Exploitation of people by godmen like sadhus, maulvis etc in the name of various retrogressive customs and beliefs largely affecting social development.
- Violence against women on various pretexts like practice of witchcraft,satietc which assume the nature of crimes like sexual assault, rape and murder .
- Superstitions arrest human endeavour and initiative and are harmful since they inactivate the reasoning capacity of human beings
- People waste their energy, time and money in worthless rituals and ceremonies decreasing economic productivity of the country.
- It averts people from realizing the value of thought and work. A faulty mental attitude towards life and work acts as a major hurdle to development.

Though superstition is mostly linked to bad effects, yet some people also attribute good effects to superstitious beliefs.Stuart Vyse, author of *"Believing in Magic: The Psychology of Superstition,"* points out, "When we are looking for ways to enhance our luck, we often see connections that are not there."On the positive side, superstition helps people manage difficult emotions, especially under conditions of uncertainty by extending some form of psychological support. Jane Risen, Associate Professor of Behavioral Science at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business

believes that superstitions make people feel like they can understand, predict, and control their environment. It is like a positive reinforcement of emotions.

Good or bad, superstitious beliefs are a reality that cannot be denied or ignored. Extremes of beliefs can bring about a lot of disequilibrium in society and hence it is to be accepted with a lot of caution and rationality.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS- III

1. Outline three main negative effects of superstitious beliefs

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2. What are the positive effects of superstitious beliefs?

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8.7 SUPERSTITION AND LAW

Considering the effects of superstitious beliefs upon the society at large, various Constitutional and legal provisions have been taken up towards checking its rampant misuse by vested interest and groups.

Constitutional Provisions:

The Article 51 A (h) of the Constitution of India envisages "to develop the scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform" as a fundamental duty for every Indian citizen. It supports and promotes logical and rational thinking as a stark opposition to the superstitious beliefs.

The Drugs and Magic Remedies (Objectionable Advertisements) Act, 1954prohibits advertisements of magical remedies, like amulets or spells, for certain diseases. A list of 56 such aliments are noted by the law which imposes a ban on both the sale and promotion of the drugs or cures that signifies 'miracle' healing. However, the effectiveness of the law to curb such unlawful and decadent practices is far from satisfactory. Ironically,

the provisions of the law is considered severely outdated as 14 of the diseases in the list are now curable, and newer diseases like AIDS are not on the list.A proposed amendment to this law has also raised questions regarding the status of traditional medicine systems likeYoga and Ayurveda with respect to modern medicine.

The Section 295A of the Indian Penal Code criminalises "deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs", it includes "words, either spoken or written, or by signs or by visible representations" entailing a maximum penalty of three years of imprisonment. It has been argued that this law is unconstitutional as it contradicts the provision of under Article 19 (freedom of expression). This was seen in the past especially with reference to a case in 1957 : Ramji Lal Modi vs State of Uttar Pradesh, Supreme Court. IPC 295A is also stated to be used with a very wide definition to prosecute critics of religion, anti-superstition activists and rationalists and hence claimed to have a bias.

(B) Regional Laws:

Certain regional laws are currently addressing local issues wherein superstitious beliefs are adversely affecting the society.

- In Bihar The Prevention of Witch (Daain) Practices Act of 1999 has been enforced.A similar Act has been adopted by the state of Jharkhand. It carries a sentence of 3 months for accusing a woman of being a witch and 6 months for causing any physical or mental harm.
- Chhattisgarh passed the Tonahi Pratadna Nivaran Act in 2005 which upholds a punishment of 3 years imprisonment for accusing a woman of being a witch and 5 years for causing her physical harm.
- Rajasthan has put the Women (Prevention of Atrocities) Bill of 2012 covering within it the phenomenon of witch-hunting. In December 2013, Odisha passed the Odisha Prevention of Witch-Hunting Bill which has a maximum penalty of seven years.Also in the same month, the Anti-Superstition and Black Magic Act was passed in Maharashtra.

- The Assam Assembly in August 2015 unanimously passed the Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Bill, 2015 making any offence under the Act as non-bailable, cognizable and non-compoundable to eliminate the superstition from society.The Act was prepared to rein in the rising incidents of witch-hunting cases across the State, following demand from the civil rights activists of the society. To that end, the state has been consistently attempting to reduce the superstitious practices in the country through various legislations and such new Acts or laws have been found to act as deterrent to such irrational beliefs.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS- IV

1. Answer the following

(a) Which Article of the Indian Constitution seeks " to develop the scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform"?

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(b) Which Act of the law prohibits advertisements of magical remedies, like amulets or spells, for certain diseases?

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8.8 LET US SUM UP

- Superstitions are a commonly witnessed phenomenon which are deep rooted in society. They can be seen anywhere, anytime, whether at home, in office or on the way.
- People of every caste, creed or community are superstitious. Though the forms of superstition may vary, their presence can be felt in every society. It is a universal phenomenon and also an integral part of the Indian society.

- Lack of rational belief, illiteracy. scientific attitude and also lack of faculty to interpret certain events. are at the root of superstitious beliefs.
- Though there has been a wide spread of education and awareness, superstitious beliefs persists yet the spread of education has, undoubtedly, acted as a deterrent against superstitions.
- The line between religion and superstition is a fine one, but when rational faith becomes blind manipulation is resorted to by using control tactics, embracing religion into it. Superstitions have two different parts. One is about good luck; another is about bad luck. The effect superstitions have on people differs from person to person according to their own attitude toward superstition.
- Superstition needs to be eradicated from society. Constitutional and Legal action on the part of the state can go a long way in reducing the impact and effects of superstition in marginalizing different sections of the people both socially, emotionally, economically and politically.



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8.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress-I

1(a) Culture; Religion

1(b) Paganism

2(a) True

2(b) False

Check Your Progress-II

1.Poverty, Lack of education, Customs and traditions

2. lack of logical thinking,backwardness and belief in irrational things

Check Your Progress-III

1. Exploitation of people, Violence against women, adversely affects reasoning capacity of people.

2. Superstitions also help people manage difficult emotions, especially under conditions of uncertainty. Jane Risen, associate professor of behavioral science at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business believes that superstitions make people feel like they can understand, predict, and control their environment. It is like a positive reinforcement of emotions.

Check Your Progress-IV

1.(a) Article 51 A (h)

(b) Drugs and Magic Remedies (Objectionable Advertisements) Act, 1954



8.11 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

A) Long Questions (Answer each question in about 300-500 words

Q.1. Discuss the different kinds of superstitions that are prevalent in our society. Illustrate some examples from your experience.

Q.2. Discuss the relationship of superstition and the Indian society. Use suitable examples.

Q.3. Elaborate on the broad causes of superstition.

Q.4. Briefly discuss the larger effects of superstition.

Q.5. Illustrate the different types of problems faced by an individual in society due to superstitious beliefs. Give examples.

Q.6. Can superstitious beliefs be countered with legal measures? Discuss.

Q.7. Write a short note on the importance of religion in the context of superstition.

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