

# Superstition

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## POINTS TO DEVELOP

Superstition-its nature and its universality.

Possible origins.

Examples of popular superstitions in the West and in India.

Cruelty involved in some superstitions.

Influence on human conduct.

How their hold has been loosened.

Element of superstition is bound to linger on.

How many of us resist checking our step on seeing a black cat crossing our path? Or, in the silence of the night, suppress an uneasy feeling on hearing the howl of a dog? It is almost universally believed that black cats crossing your path indicate failure in your mission and the howl of a dog intimates' death to someone close. Beliefs like these are termed 'superstitions.

Superstitions mean an irrational belief in or notion of the ominous significance of a particular thing, circumstance, or the like. This is a universal phenomenon cutting across caste, communal, and even national boundaries. All over the globe, people have superstitions, although the superstitions may vary from country to country or from region to region. Nor does education drive away superstitions completely. Superstitions are so deep-rooted in many societies that despite all evidence of their lack of impact, people continue to hold fast to them and allow their lives to be ruled by them.

It is argued that superstitions owe their origins to the element of fear, the urge for security and material welfare of the individual. Human beings are more concerned about their physical comfort and pleasures than other animals. Also, the desire for success in projects involving material welfare is so deep in human beings that even the thought of failure unnerves them. They would go to any length to ward off a peril, real or imaginary, to their health, life, wealth and other physical or non-physical pleasures. All these elements make humans seek something on which they can pin their hopes or put the blame if things go wrong. Superstitions involve either positively doing certain things or avoiding certain situations or things, which one may term negative superstitions. In any form, they portray the basic insecurity and lack of self-confidence in human beings.

Far back in the pre-historic era, unable to explain certain phenomena and also because they had little control over the forces of nature, human beings attributed to certain events the power to control human action. Evidence of superstitious beliefs can be found even in the earliest human settlements in the later Paleolithic and Neolithic periods. The graves of those periods contained various articles of day-to-day use in the belief that they would be of use to the dead. Here, of course, one does not quite know how to separate religious and superstitious beliefs. Even in the highly developed civilisation of the Indus Valley, amulets were used possibly to ward off evil forces or unknown disasters. The courageous and adventurous Aryans of the Rig-Vedic period were also not free from superstitions.

Superstitions probably established themselves through repeated coincidences. For example, if a person often met a particular type of animal while going out on a mission, and each time he was unsuccessful, he would have begun to regard that animal as a bad omen. Or conversely, success associated with a series of coincidental happenings could also have created a superstition. The role of priesthood was also significant in popularising superstitions, such as totemism. This gave the superstitions the status and sanctity of religion.

In the West, the number '13' is considered to bring ill-luck. A house of this number generally fills the inmate with fear of disease and death. Often, the number is missed and house numbers jump from 12 to 14! But non-Westernised Indians hardly attach importance to the number 13. Passing under a ladder is considered unlucky by a Westerner but not by an Indian. India, however, is rich in its own superstitions. Looking at an empty vessel at the time of coming out of the house is supposed to bring failure. So, its corollary is devised-keeping a vessel full of water, rice or milk on the way out! If someone sneezes when one is getting ready to go out, he is likely to fail, it is believed. People do not like to be called back or asked a question just as they are setting out for some work. Artificial black, braids or shoes are hung at the back of vehicles, whether it is a truck or a posh Mercedes. A newly-built house has to be saved from the evil eye, so an ugly fearsome face usually painted on the back of an earthen vessel is fixed to the facade of the house. Shops usually have a string of lemon and green chilies hanging over the door to ward off evil. There is no end to the list of such things in India.

At times, superstitions can be cruel and hurtful. These involve human beings. Particular people are regarded ill-omened just because a death or a serious accident took place in the family after they appeared on the scene. In Indian society, the bride often has to pay a heavy price if 'immediately after her

marriage the death of her husband or any other member of her husband's family occurs; for the rest of her life she is subjected to taunts and torture, though for no fault of hers. A widow's plight is bad enough in our society but think of the inhuman superstition of considering her an unlucky omen if she comes face to face with you on your way somewhere. Many social groups, Castes and individuals also suffer permanently because of such superstitions. Many individual, social or national projects are delayed, postponed or cancelled because of these superstitions. This has sometimes unhappy bearing on economy and prosperity. These superstitions play a significant role even in international wars; for example, during the Gulf War the number '786' was interpreted differently by the two sides!

Superstitions influence human conduct as well. They fill us with unnecessary anxiety and fear, which lead to nervous strain. They reduce the capability of people to perform certain tasks or delay the accomplishment of jobs. Many a person goes back home on coming across some ill omen. Superstitions also sour human relationships. For example, sneezing is a biological phenomenon, and asking a question at someone's departure is natural curiosity, but instances like these sometimes embitter the persons on their way somewhere.

Some of the superstitions, however, indirectly prove beneficial. For example, finding of a horse-shoe and carrying it along is regarded auspicious. The action actually proves beneficial to others as the horse-shoe could, if not removed, hurt a person or damage a wheel! Similarly, the breaking of crockery at marriages is considered good, since it lessens the feeling of loss that would otherwise be caused on account of a financial loss.

But on the whole, superstitions are detrimental to the individual as well as to society. Nevertheless, people continue to cling to them. Their hold on people is so strong that even if nothing bad happens to one after a so-called inauspicious incident, one does not change one's belief. Success on a mission despite a black cat's running across the path is not enough to free one's mind from that superstition. In fact, superstitions are irrational, beyond logic, and so no reasoning can weaken their hold on the human mind. Furthermore, as Gibbon observed in his classic on the Roman Empire, "... the practice of superstition is so congenial to the multitude that if they are forcibly awakened, they still regret the loss of their pleasing vision. "

Superstitions exist throughout the world despite scientific advances. But the spread of science and education among the masses has certainly given rise to a significant number of persons who do not believe in these superstitions. The compulsions of modern life have also caused some of the superstitions to fade

out. One cannot heed anybody's sneezes if one has to be punctual on duty or 'cannot miss a flight. The ever-increasing influence of the mass media has also proved the hollowness and harmful impact of the superstitions. Education, in general, has reduced the area of darkness in human mind and instilled among people courage, self-confidence and rationality, and this has led to the natural death of some superstitions.

However, whilst we, as the inheritors of the knowledge of the ages, make these deprecating remarks on superstitions, the words of Shakespeare's Hamlet do not fail to haunt us even now:

**There are more things, in heaven and earth, Horatio,  
Then are dreamt of in your philosophy.**