

Executive Summary

When does Superstitions become a Problem?

Superstitions become a social problem when they extend to deny dignity to human beings – either collectively or individually, and/or violate human rights recognized morally or legally by a society, and/or affect the life chances of individuals or groups of people, humiliates an individual or an entire community, we have a social problem at hand. There are several personal practices arising out of such superstitious beliefs which may not affect or hurt anyone.

When we observe the results of several superstitions, what becomes evident is a matter with which social history of Indian society has to admit with a sense of guilt, namely another version of discrimination based on the then ‘rigid’ rules of caste system. The victims are, in a majority of cases, members of the so called ‘low’ castes, especially the socially excluded castes and tribes. Even though penned at a time when proselisation of the heaten was the main purpose, a Statement made by a colonial missionary holds mirror to the situation much before Indian independence:

The lowest class have scarcely any religion at all; they are outcasts, and are neither expected nor considered fit to engage in religious exercises... But superstition supplies what religion denies them. Fear of demons and evil spirits haunt them constantly, and rites and processes are devised to get rid of these influences. Omens and portents are eagerly looked and watched for; and their domestic usages are naturally cast in the mould of these superstitions. (Osborne 1884: 131-32)

Objectives of the Study

In the recent decades it has well deservedly described as the State housing the ‘silicon valley of India’ and has been among forefront of nations in hosting renowned computer and information technological undertakings. Yet, in several other respects, the State has retained the not-so-fair reputation as being ‘traditional’ or orthodox. One such area pertains to the persistent prevalence of superstitious beliefs and practices

Malignant, Exploitative and Offensive: Superstitions in Karnataka

Despite a strong ‘anti-superstitions’ movement, vocal and active groups of rationalists, and a history of active and successful movement of the castes or communities that are usually victims of some superstitious practices (Dalits, Tribal groups, Women, Animal rights activists), Karnataka State has had its share of shameful incidents in recent times too.

It was felt that some of the superstitious practices needed to be reassessed as they were practiced, and examine the more recent changes, if any, as they were being practiced. There had been some which had been explicitly banned by an Act of legislation or executive orders (e.g., Bettale Seve, hook swinging or tossing of children), while there had been reports also of some of them being practiced secretly or in other places than where they were traditionally known for.

1. To document the local belief/legend/history of the following superstitions of Karnataka- Made Snana, Mass animal sacrifice, Tossing of children, *Bettale seve*, Jata or jada and Devadasi system, and the practice of *Sidi*
2. To study and document as to whether belief in superstitions is increasing, decreasing or has remained almost the same in the past 25 years.
 - In case the superstition is pan district, documentation of inter-district variations
3. Has the spread of education and greater exposure to the world as a whole made any impact on the belief of superstitions?
4. What practices or measures can the government and governance follow to eradicate malignant superstitions and create a superstition free Karnataka?
5. Are there contradictions in State policies?

Research Methodology

By the very nature of the topic, the study aimed at employing qualitative techniques of data gathering: observation (where feasible), in-depth interviews and focused group discussions with a range of informants: members of the affected households or families, religious leaders, NGOs and activists, as also protagonists who support the practices and beliefs. A day’s consultation was held in Bengaluru with the participation of representatives from different sectors (religion, law, police, academia, and activists.)

Observations, discussions and interviews with a randomly chosen sample of 796 respondents gave us an indication of not only the way the practices have persisted but also

indicate the nature and extent of changes that were occurring. Above all, the latter gave us indications as to why some have persisted, and what seem to be limitations of the State initiatives in eradicating them. Policy recommendations are made at the end of this Chapter derived from such an approach.

Separate Interview and discussion were prepared and employed for data collection. Questions pertained to the perception of the origin of practices, narratives about the beliefs behind such practices, and the nature of changes if any.

Change Agents and Socio-Cultural Resistance to Change: The past 25 – 30 years have witnessed spectacular changes in our system of communication. In short, the horizon of knowledge has far exceeded what it may have been, say 25 years ago. Yet contradictions galore with modernity and scientific advancement. One such contradiction is the nature of change in respect of our faith and beliefs in supernatural or superstitious causation.

We may find a continuum of change in respect of belief or practice of the different rituals or practices concerning the eight superstitions we examined. At one extreme of the continuum is the process of modification as a response to changing forces, and at the other, abandonment. In between, we find replacement, or stealthily practicing some of them. We may find ‘modification’ as a major pattern of change in respect of Mari Bali, Made Snana, and Sidi. At the other extreme is the response of abandonment of practices. Foremost of them and more obviously has been the practice of tossing the children as a ritual. Also abandoned is the practice of Bettale Seve. But here we enter the domain of speculations and rumours competing with facts. There is one version which claims that there are stray instances of its practice, in small numbers and in remote places. If this indeed is true, it speaks equally of the continued ignorance and the role of facilitating institutions or individuals. Another version of claims places the practice of Bettale Seve at the point of modification rather than abandonment. According to this version, men and women wear wet clothes – which in any case get dried up by the time they reach the shrine, and therefore the practice is no different from any other form of prayers. Ajalu too is another set of practices that is certainly on the way out, and as having been part of Kambla or annual rituals of being offered to eat human wastes, they are certainly things of the past.

There has been a long history of rationalist movement in the country. Just as India is known as land of religion, superstitions and blind beliefs, it is also known for its share of rationalism. This history of rationalism goes as far back as the Charwaka philosophy in

ancient times, and the birth of Buddhism too is to be seen in the context of the proto-history of rationalism in India. Other prominent names and movements associated with rationalism are Basaveshwara, Sant Kabir, Sant Tukaram, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Mahatma Phule, Pandita Ramabai, Agarkar, Maharshi Karve, Â Raghunath Karve, Periyar E.V. Ramasami, M.N. Roy, Gora, Dr. Ambedkar , Abraham Kovoov etc, (see Nanavaty, n.d.; and his review of Quack 2012). As has been the history of several social reform movements characterised by giving birth to a new *avatar* of the very institution against which the movement may have been a protest and attempt to reform, some of these attempts too gave rise to newer versions of religions and the accompanying superstitions.

The late 1970s witnessed a State sponsored search for truth behind several of the commonly held superstitions and belief in occult and witchcraft in Karnataka. Among those in the forefront as Dr. H Narasimhaiah, the famed educationist and freedom fighter. The committee consisted of other prominent thinkers and scientists such as Dr. C R Chandrashekar, Dr. H S Narayan, Dr. S M Mallikarjunaiah, and Dr. Keshav among others. Their responsibility was to find facts behind mysterious happenings in the name of Bhanamati. The committee itself came up with a report that the art of Bhanamati was merely a myth terrorising people, and the victims were largely with no education or awareness. Dr. Chandrashekar, the renowned psychiatrist, pointed out that Bhanamati and superstitions about them were all a result of some psycho-somatic disorders (Chandrashekar 1992; see also Gangolli 2012; Pasha 2014; and Dhabolkar and Arde 2014).

As late as 2013, in response to an invitation by the Government of Karnataka, a high powered committee went into understanding the body of blind beliefs and superstitions, arrived at a typology of superstitions that could be regulated under a law, and identified the extent of offence and punishment for carrying out acts based on such superstitions. It eventually arrived at a Draft Bill, popularly known as the Draft Superstition Bill which is pending before the Government.

As may be expected, any attempt to regulate phenomenon that has a religious flavour in it received strong protests from sections which feel threatened. The Draft Bill too is no exception. As Pasha (2014:198-200) points out, much of the opposition seems to have arisen more my not reading the draft Bill or recognising the fact that it is only a draft. The State has the scope to modify it as it deems fit based on the recommendations of its legal experts.

What then is the direction of social change in regard to superstitious practices? The driving force seems, as of now, the tightening legal and monitoring regime. Belief in the practices has not completely gone. This issue takes one to the need to educate and build awareness. The terms scientific temperament have been used so often, and for so long, perhaps its weight has been lost. Scientific temperament as a notion has to free itself from the mystery of science, but embrace the domain of common sense of linking cause and effect.

Of all the different superstitious practices listed, the law to govern such practices was accounted to be the most efficient tool for bringing about a positive change. There was a standard and repetitive suggestion made also that there was a need for strict enforcement of the law once it is made. Appropriate law would be most effective, going by the response patterns to our question on the topic, in respect of Made Snana (opinion by 87.5 per cent), followed by Mass Animal Sacrifice (80 per cent), and Sidi. Law seems to be much less effective in respect of Devadasi system (25.47 per cent), and Nude Worship (31.11 per cent.) This set of views certainly calls for the efficacy of the prevailing laws and their implementation. What seems to be more effective for Devadasi to bring down its practice? Among all the different options given, paradoxically, it is law that gets a higher efficacy although, it must be hastened to add the scores here is not comparative to each other in their ability to bring about a change.

Next to law, it is the role of education that gets a greater importance (48.87 per cent) to bring about a change, when all the superstitions are taken together. But education has highest importance in bringing about the positive change in respect of Made Snana (at 97.5 per cent), followed by its impacting Ajalu and Sidi at 50 per cent each. Education seems to have least impact on the practices related to Devadasi (12.75 per cent), but a slightly higher impact -though in small proportion - on Jata / Jade (27.45 per cent). Nude worship too has much impact by education at 32.2 per cent).the impact of Television too is much lower than the others in bringing about a decline in beliefs over superstitious practices.

Recommendations

Prior to making some recommendations¹, it is appropriate to recall the views of Habermas on reason, secularism and religion. For, the spirit of what are listed here is guided by the debates in which he has engaged. Habermas has challenged reason to clarify its relation to religious experience and to engage religions in a constructive dialogue. ‘Given the global challenges facing humanity, nothing is more dangerous than the refusal to communicate that we encounter today in different forms of religious and ideological fundamentalism. (Habermas 2010)’ In order to engage in this dialogue, two conditions must be met: religion must accept the authority of secular reason as the fallible results of the sciences and the universalistic egalitarianism in law and morality; and conversely, secular reason must not set itself up as the judge concerning truths of faith.

The following are the Recommendations of the study.

1. All efforts need to be made to pass the proposed Bill. The Bill has been prepared with considerable intellectual inputs, but somehow has failed to gain people’s confidence and formulate guidelines for its effective implementation.
 2. Many of the superstitions addressed in this study are already under the State’s administrative scan or specific laws enacted. A review by a legal expert and from the department of police is suggested to examine the loopholes in their implementation, and seek remedial suggestions, every ten years or so.
 3. An urgent review needs to be undertaken, of the social and psychological impact of our advertisements, religious discourses, programmes and commentaries of religious/superstitious matters in popular media – both visual and print. This is not to suggest that they should be gagged, but an assessment to be made of the nature of impact. In the many other countries there is a major concern over political correctness of the programmes. In our context, there is a need to be concerned additionally with the ‘social’ and/or ‘cultural’ correctness of the programmes aired. This sensitivity is not something that can be imposed but as a value and responsibility, to be evolved.
- Censoring the programmes that exhibit or support evil practices needs to be considered.**

¹ These must be read in conjunction with the suggestions made by participants in the Workshop (See Annexure IX).

4. It must be recalled that the State has a role to govern the places of worship such as temples. Over the years, the State has been financially supporting many of them, besides paying a salary and upkeep support of the temple structures if they are under Muzurai department. It is necessary that this relationship is made accountable with respect to what *Seva* is offered for a fee or *Kanike* at the temples. Just as a product cannot advertise things for which it is not capable, so too the *Sevas*. Such of the *sevas* that promote superstitious beliefs must be discouraged to be rendered as a service, at least in the Muzurai temples.
5. The Consumer Protection Act to be made applicable also to many of the services that are offered at a premium through public advertisements.
6. Many of the superstitious practices under considerations are carried out with a view to fulfil a vow taken much earlier than at the time of performing the act. Focus of the policy and implementing agencies seems to be more at the performance level and time than at the time taking vows. While it is not feasible to monitor the latter, much awareness is to be created about the restrictions in fulfilling such vows – whether in a temple or any other public place.
7. Such an awareness building cannot go hand in hand with the kind of publicity producing literature, audio-visual programmes etc. concerning places and forms of worship. State should have a say in the matters publicised in this realm, especially if any of the practices involve imposing indignities or violation of human rights of vulnerable groups of people.
- 8. Knowledge and awareness about rejecting evil practices to be created in the young minds by introducing them in School curriculum- in Social Science & moral Science books and develop scientific values.**
- 9. Kannada & Culture dept. to develop short documentary films on evils of superstitions and their consequences and generate awareness to eradicate them.**
10. Specific castes, heads of religious institutions and similar others are not to be alienated from the drive to create a scientific temperament. They need to be involved actively in awareness campaign drive to get better and desired results.
11. Annual fairs, Melas, Jaatres to be monitored much more vigilantly to prevent any of the obnoxious practices.
12. CSR initiatives to be focused on eradication of superstitions, and promote Local NGOs, Youth Clubs, Mahila Mandals, Self Help Groups and other Associations to be involved in the process of eradication of superstitions.