

Information awareness through effective information support system to stop superstitious practices

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Explores newspaper reports regarding crimes developed out of superstitions and the motives behind those crimes. Newspaper reports were analysed to draw quantitative statistics of collected data. Shows that untested presuppositions not only challenge the development of society but also raise serious debate regarding the prevailing callousness in eradicating unwanted criminal activities under the shadow of superstition. Suggestions have been made to check unwanted deaths and other crimes over innocents with the spreading of scientific temperament and rationality among semiliterate. A model of effective information support system has also been incorporated in this paper, which can gradually eradicate the untested preconceptions.

Introduction

According to 2001 census report, 72.2% of Indians reside in 5,87,226 inhabited villages across India. Among the rural population, 58.7% are literate whereas the literacy rate of urban population has been 79.9% giving the total literacy rate at 65.4% in India.¹ These figures of the census show that the existing literacy rate is not adequate to fulfill the mission of information support. Expansion of education is the prerequisite of information support. Literate people can accept the information support more easily than the non-literate people.

Moreover, the systems of information support in rural India are insufficient. Scarcity of information brings information poverty and hollowness in thinking. The masses at the grass-root level should be properly and equally informed about the up-to-date sources of information. Otherwise the rural people will be alienated from the nationwide thought of development for which attempts are being taken mostly through panchayati raj system².

Ray et al³ in one of their recently conducted studies have concluded that Rabindranath Tagore, the greatest Bengali poet and social reformer had “started rural reconstruction project at Sriniketan in 1921 aiming to make villagers self-reliant and self-respecting and competent to make efficient use of resources for the fullest development of their physical, social, economic and intellectual potential

and abilities; and to get them acquainted with the cultural tradition of their own.”

Many projects have been exclusively undertaken for rural development and many studies have collected various statistics regarding rural growth and development. But the information support to the rural underprivileged has not been extended sufficiently to each and every corner of India. Rural development and growth as per national standard cannot be achieved without the increase of rural literacy rate, involvement of the rural mass and eradicating their dogmatic approach towards social and economic consequences.

Rural society

It is not easy to define rural society. Although most of the villages in India comprise of rural society, yet there is no uniformity in structure and function. There are many convenient characteristics by which rural society can be better identified. A few characteristic features of rural society include:

- Density of population is lower in comparison to urban society.
- Majority of the population are related to nature and land for their livelihood.
- Most of the people live at the subsistence level.
- Kinship plays an important role.

- Value system is highly traditional and parochial.
- Social change is accepted slowly.
- Low literacy rate.
- High regard to untested preconceptions and predetermined logic in solving crisis.

Scientific temperament is still in its infancy. But there is no fixed boundary by which a rural society can be segregated from the rest. Moreover a section of an urban setup may have the characteristics of rural society. According to Andre Beteille⁴, Indian society can be divided first into urban and rural sector. He further classified the rural sector into a tribal and non-tribal sector. So it is clear that in the rural sector, there are categories like peasant society, tribal society and society in transitional form. Social transition is a continuous process and thus begets folk-urban continuum, tribal peasant continuum, parochialisation and many more social states. The folk-urban continuum model of Robert Redfield may be criticized as an over generalized concept but it is undoubtedly an effective model of the process of social change from simple homogeneous to complex heterogeneous. Redfield's definition of peasants as 'small producers for their own consumption' and 'an elite of the manor, town or city' raised the concept of alienation of rural society⁵. The barrier caused by the socially imposed alienation on the marginal people can be overcome with the information support. It will not only equip the rural people with the up-to-date information but also increase their information processing skills in the process of development.

The study conducted for this paper has a clear indication of the fact that in spite of so many rural development projects the untested preconceptions is still one of the major lacunas of rural India. Many reports in the study have happened in the towns or cities as well. But the rate of happenings in the cities or towns is much fewer than those in the villages. So the main focus is on the rural society with out ignoring the reports of the urban happenings.

Why untested preconceptions ?

Narlikar has asserted that "Although man has given himself the title of rational creature, in reality he is far from that, so in everyday life there is a continuing battle between scientific temper and ideas guided by untested preconceptions."⁶

When providing information support to the rural mass, the evolution and existence of those prepossessions among them should not be ignored. According to Malinowski, "mystical, non-empirical conceptions and doctrines"⁷ are the results of fear of uncertainty and ignorance about the cause and effect relation of various phenomena. When these concepts evolved, knowledge was in its infancy. A vacuum of logical understanding of natural facts and phenomenon had been filled up by various unchallenged presuppositions. Myths and beliefs have grown as a result of primitive man's interpretation of natural phenomena and used to provide a false relief during period of crisis or uncertainty^{8, 9}. An extensive study of various news report shows that these prepossessions and non-empirical concepts are very frequent in rural sector.

Objectives of the study

- To analyze various newspaper reports regarding harmful and criminal superstitions,
- To confirm the presence of barbaric acts like sati, daini killing, human sacrifice in Indian society, and
- To suggest steps to an effective information support system for the eradication of criminal superstitions.

Methodology

Content analysis has been done in respect of newspaper reports of mystical nature and crimes due to prevailing superstitions. More than hundred news reports pertaining to the period August 2004 to May 2006 were taken for the study. The dailies from which the news have been taken are *The Times of India*, *The Ananda Bazar Patrika*, *The Bartaman*, *The Sangbad Pratidin*, and *The Telegraph* all of which are published from Kolkata, West Bengal. The contents of the reports have been examined and analyzed for the study. However, in instances where the same news has been reported in different newspapers, only one of them was considered to avoid duplication.

Data analysis

From the analysis of news reports it is clear that in this age of modernity and space ride, society still bears the

Table 1 — State-wise occurrence of newspaper reports

Sl. No.	Type of happenings	West Bengal	Bihar	Orissa	Assam	Tripura	Uttar Pradesh	Madhya Pradesh	Others
1.	Report of Sati	×	√	×	×	×	√	√	√
2.	Report of Daini Death	√	√	√	√	√	×	×	×
3.	Report of Exorcist's treatment for snakebite patient	√	√	√		√	×	×	×
4.	Report of death caused by parochial treatment of snakebite patients	√	√	×	×	×	×	×	×
5.	Report of Exorcist's treatment for ailing patients	√	√	×	×	×	×	×	×
6.	Report of death caused by parochial treatment of ailing patient	√	√	×	×	×	×	×	×
7.	Report of Sacrifice	√	√	×	×	×	×	×	×
8.	Report of Child sacrifice	√	√	√	×	×	√	×	√
9.	Report of Ghost/spirit rustication from a person	√	×	×	×	×	×	×	×

Note: Report not found = × and Report found = √

intolerable practices like *sati*, *daini* killing, human sacrifice etc., which are nothing but horrendous crimes. Sati is an evil practice of self immolation in the pyre of one's husband. The same had existed and was glorified during medieval period. It was strictly prohibited during British period by the Sati (Prevention) Act. Due to the occurrence of this evil practice in independent India, Central government has passed the Commission of Sati Prevention Act of 1987 to uproot the practice from the society. Another evil practice still prevails to label someone as daini as the result of untested preconceptions. As for example, if Mr. X has been afflicted with some disease for a long period, sometimes an exorcist foretells this as the bad sight of Mr. Y, who is a daini in the disguise of human being. People close to Mr. X also begin to believe in the same and torture Y without questioning themselves.

Table 1 shows state-wise occurrences of fatal superstitious incidents. Reports regarding Sati have been from the states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. Daini deaths has become a recurring phenomenon in the states like West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Assam and Tripura. Snakebite patients are very often sent to exorcists in many parts of West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Tripura. As a result most of

Table 2 — Distribution of newspaper reports on superstition

Sl. No.	Type of Reports	% of occurrence
1	Sacrifice	15
2	Daini	13
3	Ghost	16
4	Witch	03
5	Sati	10
6	Treatment by exorcist for Snakebite patients	07
7	Treatment by exorcist for Other patients	06
8	Keeping of Dead body	03
9	Marriage with dog	01
10	Attack on Low caste	02
11	Miscellaneous	24

the patients die after treatment by exorcists. In the states like West Bengal and Bihar, death caused by parochial treatment of ailing patients has been reported.

As per to Table 2, ten percent of the collected news is related to *sati* –whether it is the report on ‘attempt to sati foiled’ or ‘book glorifying sati’ or ‘jumped into pyre’. Reports regarding ghost, daini death and human sacrifice are maximum and these reports together comprises of 44% of total reports. Many peculiar reports have come out like ‘marriage with dog’, ‘keeping of dead body’ etc. which are obviously of lesser

percentages. Treatments of snakebite patients by exorcists have been recurring phenomena of the villages. In most of the cases the patients died without getting proper medical attention. Seven percent of the reports are about snake bites. In a worst case, a snakebite patient was given electric shock generated from motorbike for his cure! Not only the snakebite patients, but also patients of other diseases are sent for treatment to exorcists. In all cases proper treatment was replaced by a set of rituals performed by the exorcists. As a result many patients suffering from malaria are told to pray to *daini*.

Table 3 shows the category of victims labelled as *daini*. Most of the victims are women (18) and are followed by men (7) and children (4). Highest number of victims (12) is from the state of West Bengal. The number of victims labelled as *daini* in Bihar, Assam, Tripura and Orissa are seven, four, three and three respectively. Total number of victims labelled as *daini* is twenty-nine.

Table 4 represents the type of torture against victims labelled as *daini* as well as the number of victims in each category. Type of tortures found against framed *dainis* are: killed, rusticated from village, beaten, etc. Most of the victims (16) were killed. Seven victims were rusticated from village and four victims were beaten. The length of torture extends from killing to huge fine and humiliation in various forms (in one worst case it was to take human excreta and paraded naked) by the neighbours. Most of the criminals in the act of *daini* killing are the neighbours.

According to Table 5, human sacrifice like *daini* or *sati* takes many lives. There were reports of thirteen human sacrifices and most of the victims were children (9). The number of women sacrificed is three and men sacrificed is one. In all the cases the criminals are the neighbours. The study found the incidence of human sacrifice happening in the states like West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra etc.

Analysis of the reports reveal that glorification and practice of *sati* still prevails in Indian society. In most of the cases the family members and neighbours are responsible for this crime. Labelling someone as *daini* still exists in Indian society and exorcists and neighbours of the victims are responsible for this. *Daini* death has become a recurring phenomenon in many states of

eastern and north eastern India. Practice of human sacrifice is still continued in various parts of this country.

Information support system for awareness to stop superstitious practices

Eradication of untested preconceptions is not just the task of science popularizing organizations. Information awareness campaign as like in polio eradication campaign needs to be accomplished to evolve a more rational rural society. Some of the components of an information support system for awareness to stop superstition practices are discussed below:

Establish rural information centres

To launch the programme of information support the foremost task is to establish information centres in the rural sectors.

Some of the centres have already been identified in a previously published paper during 2006 where we have shown that these centres can be used as the information hub for the rural people for their improvement and betterment in living standards¹⁰.

These centres are:

- Rural library as the chief rural information centre
- Panchayat office (Office of Gram Savha and Panchayet Samiti)
- School (Primary, Secondary and other) and Colleges
- Village pre-nursery (Anganwari Vidyalaya) & Nursery (Sishu Siksha Niketan)
- Women Co-operatives
- Women Empowerment Group and Women Micro-credit Group
- Club, Post Office
- Science Popularizing Organisation, Eco-club, Science Club
- Voluntary Organisation and Non Governmental Organisation

Mass media

Nobody can deny the role of mass media in making a society conscious against superstition. Canvassing

Table 3 — Victims labeled as Daini

Sl.No.	Category	State wise number					Total
		West Bengal	Bihar	Orissa	Tripura	Assam	
1.	Woman	9	5	2	1	1	18
2.	Man	2	2	1	1	1	07
3.	Child	1	-	-	1	2	04
	Total						29

Table 4 — Type of torture to the victims labeled Daini

Sl. No.	Type	Category of victim	State wise number					Total
			West Bengal	Bihar	Orissa	Tripura	Assam	
1.	Killed	Woman	2	4	1	1	1	09
		Man	-	2	-	1	1	04
		Child	-	-	-	2	1	03
2.	Rusticated	Woman	4	-	-	-	-	04
		Man	2	-	-	-	-	02
		Child	1	-	-	-	-	01
3.	Beaten	Woman	2	1	-	-	-	03
		Man	-	1	-	-	-	01
		Child	-	-	-	-	-	00
4.	Other	Woman	1	1	-	-	-	02
		Man	-	-	-	-	-	00
		Child	-	-	-	-	-	00

through mass media can be an effective way to provide the common mass with the valuable strength in combating superstitions in their life. The visual media has an edge over the print media and in the marginal section of rural mass the visual media can perform greater role to expose the hollowness of superstitious rituals during the period of their crisis.

Support personnel

The task of the support personnel is to increase information literacy and to expand scientific temperament so as to tackle crimes arising out of superstitions. Beliefs in old traditions and presuppositions cannot be the excuse of the offenders. The support personnel not only engage themselves in providing information to the people in combating superstition but also be proactive in finding each of the cases of crimes due to superstition. They have to report these incidents to the police to book the culprits; otherwise the culprits will freely move in the guise of

Table 5 — Deaths due to superstition

Sl. No.	Type of killing	Number	%
1.	Daini	16	46
2.	Sacrifice	13	37
3.	Sati	06	17

these superstitions or glorifying these superstitions and always try to find out a new prey.

This group includes the following:

- Rural librarians
- Panchayat officials
- Teachers of various rural schools
- Village development officers (*gram sevak/gram sevika*)

- *Krishi Prajukti Sahayak* (agricultural extension officers)
- Auxiliary nurses and officials of rural health centres
- Members of women empowerment/self-help group
- Officials of rural banks and other banks of rural areas
- Agents of various insurance companies
- Officials of non-government organization and voluntary organization
- Retired government officials of the area
- Primary health service
- Sanitation system
- Drinking water
- Micro credit system
- Rural marketing
- Human resource development

Manpower

In addition to the support personnel mentioned above, huge numbers of senior citizens in the name of pensioners are ready to serve for the country in lieu of nothing more than their pension. It is suggested to make a survey of willingness among ex-government employees many of whom are ready to come forward. It can surely be told that these warriors of many battles not only come forward in eradicating superstitions but also can discharge their duties relating to materialization of various action plans sponsored by government and non-governmental organizations.

Workshop and training

Raja Rammohan Roy Library Foundation (RRRLF), the nodal agency for public library system can be an effective coordinating organization which can regularize the mode of training for the support personnel, norms to be followed, selection of trainers, standardization etc¹¹. Various organizations engaged in the dissemination of information and knowledge, popularizing scientific temperament have to come forward to make this a reality. The trainers may be the professionals of various fields of basic science, technology, medical science and information science etc.

Development

Only campaign against superstition cannot eradicate these evil practices. Standard of living of the target people should improve at an effective rate so that they can accept the provided information. The foremost areas those needed improvement are given below:

Application of IT in rural sector

With tremendous growth and advancement in telecommunications and networking technology, India has been developing as a global leader in these fields. Information support can effectively be provided with the help of digital devices like information kiosk, which is a simple computerized display to provide information or services to the target people, Internet, a computer based networking system to connect each and every computer of village India, introduction of computer at the Panchayat level to make e-Panchayat and e-governance. Initiatives have already been made by various agencies and National Informatics Centre (NIC)¹² is the premier organization towards the extension of e-governance to the rural sector through Rural Informatics.

Conclusion

From the above study it is clear that preconceptions often cause unbearable torture to many innocent victims and even end in their killing. To increase rationality among these rural societies, a need for information support has been established. Rationality in thinking can bring real freedom to the people and can enhance self-esteem of a person. Numerous parochial motives, which are still active, will gradually disappear with the extension of information support.

In this paper special interest has been shown towards the study of evil effects of prevailing untested preconceptions in rural India. This does not necessarily mean that urban India is free from these untested preconceptions. The study can be extended to the urban India to get the real picture in that sector regarding the gravity of parochial motives.

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