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Superstitions in Urban Community Affecting Health : Assessment and Interventional study in Meerut, India

**Saurabh Sharma¹, Rahul Bansal², Sartaj Ahmad^{3*}, Arvind Kr Shukla⁴,
Anishka Anand⁵, Taniya Gulia⁶**

¹ Assistant Professor, ² Professor, ³Assistant Professor(Medical Sociology) , ⁴Assistant Professor(Statistics), ⁵⁻⁶ Interns. Department of Community Medicine , Subharti Medical College Meerut

*Corresponding author: Dr. Sartaj Ahmad
Telephone: 09897093882

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Abstract

Superstition refers to any belief or practice which is explained by supernatural causality, and is in contraindication to modern science. Objectives of this study were, (i) To assess the Superstitions and blind believes prevalent in the urban community,(ii) To provide knowledge about social and health related Superstitions through focus group discussion, audio visuals equipments and role play (Nukkad natak) and (iii) To assess the outcome after intervention. The study was a questionnaire-based survey, 20 subjects from each ethnic group were selected by cluster

sampling of residential areas where that particular group has its highest concentration, making a total of 100 subjects. It was found that most people do have some superstitious beliefs which can be corrected by intervention if done in community. It was thus concluded that majority of our population believes in superstitions, which are more common in illiterates. These superstitions not only predict health seeking behaviour of a person but also play a major role in shaping the response of a community to any health intervention program. Without the knowledge of these superstitions, effective community participation cannot be achieved.

Keywords: Superstitions, general believes, health intervention

Introduction

The word *superstition* is sometimes used to refer to religious practices (e.g., Voodoo) other than the one prevailing in a given society. It is also commonly applied to beliefs and practices surrounding luck, prophecy and spiritual beings, particularl. Superstition is the belief in supernatural causality—that one event causes another without any natural process linking the events—such as astrology, omens, witchcraft, prophecies, etc., that contradicts natural science [1]. Most people used traditional methods like magic, omens etc for their mental illness. The social causes of the mental health are worries, anxieties, emotional stress, tension, frustration, unhappy family, broken family, poverty, industrialization, urbanization, changing family structure, economic insecurity, rejection, neglect, etc.[2]

Living in the 21st century, India still survives under the thick cloud of superstitious beliefs, which have been present since Neolithic times and have undergone slight modifications. Moreover, the people are tightly locked up in religious taboos thus taking useless practices for necessary practices. All these have created a deluge of health problems because people find satisfaction in traditional and superstitious treatment rather than contacting certified medical practitioners. It has lead to an increase in the number of sub clinical cases, resistant infections and death due to treatable diseases.

There are several practices which are sound from a health point of view, but are enforced through superstitions. Every community has its own beliefs related the health. They can be harmful, useless, helpful or neutral. A study conducted by Ahmad S et al .(2015) revealed that Male circumcision has been performed on boys and young men for many years, primarily for religious and cultural reasons. There are risks associated with circumcision if done by unprofessional [3]. An another study done by Ahmad S et al . (2013) suggested that the leprosy diseases are believed to be caused by supernatural means or by the violation of social taboo. The principal belief is related to an individual misdeed in his/ her previous birth for which he incurs the wrath of almighty God.[4]

In conducting this survey we aimed at identifying various superstitious in the urban community of Meerut District.

Materials and Methods

This quasi interventional study was conducted in Multan Nagar urban area Meerut and in serving area of Urban Health Training Centre Meerut under department of community medicine of Subharti Medical College Meerut.

A questionnaire based quasi experimental study was done among the 50 urban families. A pre tested self structured closed –ended questionnaire in Hindi language was used to assessment the existing level of knowledge, and practice towards superstitions. It was part of Problem Solving for Better Health (PSBH) in department of community medicine of Subharti Medical College for last seven years and done by undergraduate students of 3rd year. The Interviewers filled the questionnaires after taking informed consent. Questions relating to definition of superstitions, definition of health, their belief in superstitions were asked.

The duration of the study was from Jan 2015- April 2015.The intervention session focused on aspects of the superstitions as assessed during the pre – intervention assessment.

Following the initial assessment an educational intervention programme was conducted amongst the target group through learning objectives, instruments of evaluation and teaching learning materials were used through lectures, demonstration with the help of a power point presentation and role play (Nukkad natak) done by the group of selected students of MBBS 2012 Batch . Post intervention assessment was conducted and same questionnaire was used. All the data was collected and appropriate statistical methods was carried out using Microsoft Excel, to check the superstitions in the community.

Results

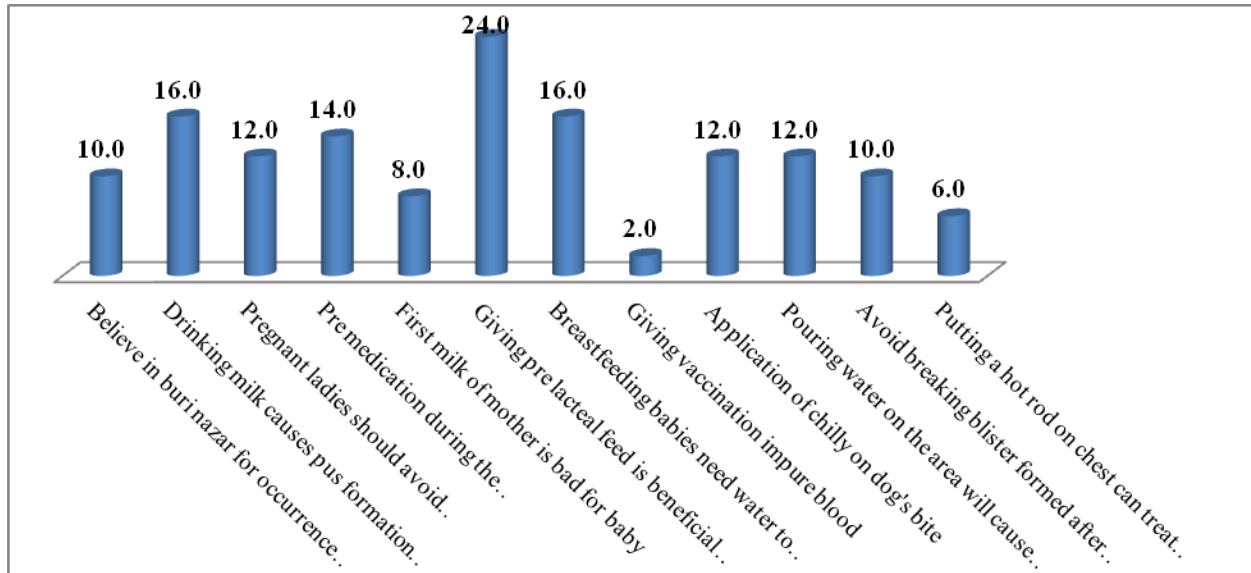
i. Health related superstitions

Table 1: Percentage distribution of pre and post test health related superstitions

HEALTH RELATED SUPERSTITIONS	PRE	POST	P- VALUE
Believe in buri nazar(evil eyes) for occurrence of any illness	54.0	44.0	0.317
Drinking milk causes pus formation in the wound	38.0	22.0	0.081
Pregnant ladies should avoid looking at lunar eclipse	58.0	46.0	0.229
Pre medication during the pregnancy will change the fetus to boy	18.0	4.0	0.025
First milk of mother is bad for baby	16.0	8.0	0.218
Giving pre lacteal feed is beneficial for new born health	90.0	66.0	0.004
Breastfeeding babies need water to drink	34.0	18.0	0.068
Giving vaccination impure blood	2.0	0.0	--
Application of chilly on dog's bite	48.0	36.0	0.224
Pouring water on the area will cause blister formation	62.0	50.0	0.227
Avoid breaking blister formed after burning	48.0	38.0	0.313
Putting a hot rod on chest can treat respiratory problem	12.0	6.0	0.295

Before the study (54.0%) people believed in buri nazar(evil eyes) for occurrence of any illness. Post intervention there was 10% increase in awareness about buri nazar(evil eyes) for occurrence of any illness.

Graph (1): Percent changes in knowledge and believe after intervention in health related superstitions



Before the study (38.0%) people believed that drinking milk cases pus formation in the wound. After intervention 16% people stopped believing that drinking milk cases pus formation in the wound.

Before the study (58.0%) people believed that pregnant women should avoid looking at lunar eclipse. After intervention 12% people stopped believing that pregnant women should avoid looking at lunar eclipse.

Before the study (18.0%) people believed that pre medications during pregnancy will change the foetus to boy. Post intervention 14% people gained knowledge regarding pre medications during pregnancy that claim to change the foetus to boy.

Before the study (16.0%) people believed that the first milk of mother is bad for neonate baby. After intervention 08% people stopped believing that a first milk of mother is bad for neonate baby.

Before the study (90.0%) people believed that giving pre lacteal feed is beneficial for new born's health. After intervention 24% people stopped believing that giving pre lacteal feed is beneficial for new born's health.

Before the study (34.0%) people believed that breastfeed babies need water to drink. After intervention 18% people stopped believing that breastfeed babies need water to drink.

Before the study (02.0%) people that giving vaccinations impure blood, After intervention, there was 100% awareness about vaccination among the people.

Before the study (48.0%) people that application of chilly powder can apply on dog's bite wound. After intervention 12% people stopped believing that application of chilly powder can apply on dog's bite wound.

Before the study (62.0%) people that pouring water on the burnt area will cause blister formation. Post intervention, 12% people gained awareness on the beneficial effects of pouring water on the burnt area.

Before the study (48.0%) people that avoid breaking blister formed after burning. Post intervention 10% people gained knowledge about breaking blister formed after burning.

Before the study (12.0%) people that putting a hot rod on chest can treat respiratory problem. After intervention 06% people started believing that putting a hot rod on chest can not treat respiratory problem.

Before the study (60.0%) people that crossing of a black cat is a bad omen. After intervention 12% people stopped believing that crossing of a black cat is a bad omen.

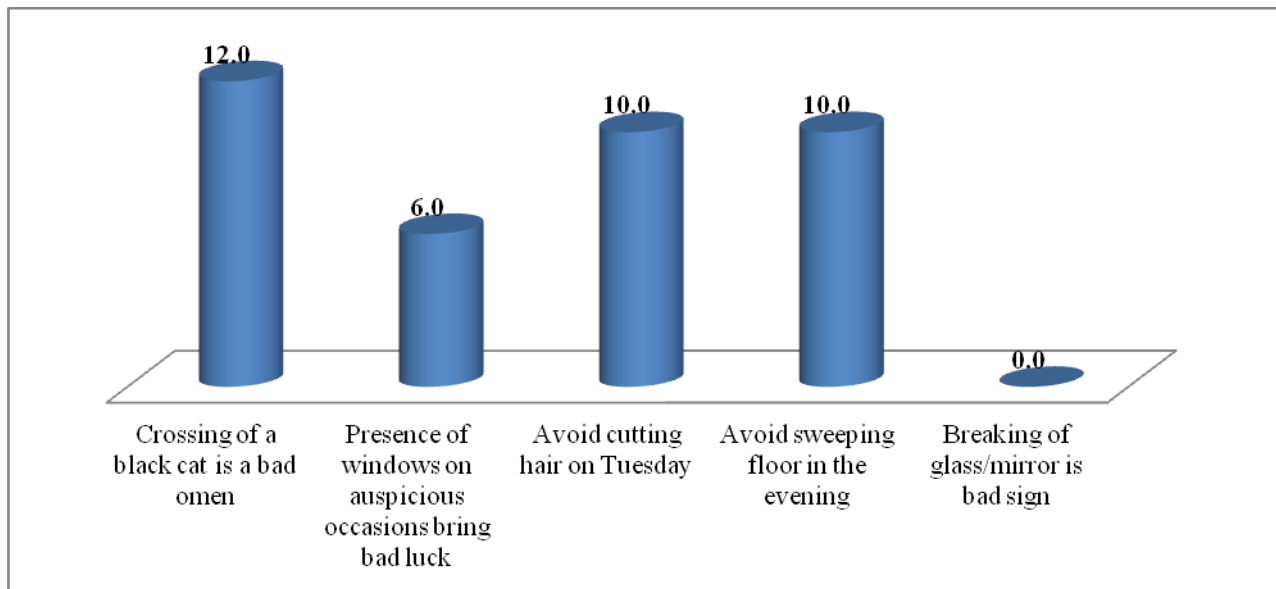
Before the study (16.0%) people that presence of widows on auspicious occasions brings bad luck. After intervention 06% people stopped believing that presence of widows on auspicious occasions that it brings bad luck.

ii. General superstitions

Table2: Distribution of pre and post test general superstitions

GENERAL SUPERSTITIONS	PRE	POST	P- VALUE
Crossing of a black cat is a bad omen	60.0	48.0	0.229
Presence of widows on auspicious occasions bring bad luck	16.0	10.0	0.372
Avoid cutting hair on Tuesday	64.0	54.0	0.309
Avoid sweeping floor in the evening	62.0	52.0	0.313
Breaking of glass/mirror is bad sign	62.0	62.0	--

Graph2: Changes in knowledge and believe after intervention in general superstitions



Before the study (64.0%) people believed that cutting hair should be avoided on Tuesday. After intervention 10% people stopped believing the same.

Before the study (62.0%) people that avoid sweeping floors in the evening. After intervention 10% people stopped believing that sweeping floors in the evening had any negative effects.

Before the study (62.0%) people that breaking of glass/ mirror is a bad sign. After intervention same 62% people suggested that breaking of glass/ mirror is a bad sign. There was no increase in awareness.

Discussion

Superstition refers to any belief or practice which is explained by supernatural causality, and is in contraindication to modern science. The number of Superstitions and blind beliefs in India is very large as the Indian society is made of people belonging to various cultural, ethnic, linguistic and racial groups. Superstitions beliefs are usually derived from parents, grandparents and other people we respect. We accept beliefs, without trying to prove that they are true. Some people, like sportsmen, can be more superstitious than others. In India , the sight of politicians with their fingers sporting rings of different colored stones is common. Superstitions are common enough in the film industry. Film makers come up with bizarre spellings for their film's titles to satisfy a numerology belief.

In our study (54.0%) people believed in buri nazar(evil eyes) for occurrence of any illness. Instead of taking adequate treatment when one gets sick, we blame it on buri nazar (evil eyes) and fight them with weapons like “ chilly, oil and lemon”, further increasing the distress of the sick person.

In this study (58.0%) people believed that pregnant women should avoid looking at lunar eclipse. Superstition is like an eclipse which casts its shadow forever and gulps the whole society.

In this study (84.0%) people believed that a first milk of mother is bad for neonate baby. A study done by Ahmad S et al. (2014) told that (45.00%) mothers did not give colostrum as a first milk due to prohibited by elderly female, (38.05%) women thought that it is harmful for the baby, (08.75%) ignorance about advantages of this [5].

In our current study (48.0%) people believed that application of chilli powder can apply on dog's bite wound. A study conducted by Parashar P et al (2015) revealed that 46.93% people were the believer of some used old methods of treatment like application of chilies (red) powder and herbal paste for wound management of dog bites [6].

In our study (60.0%) people believed that crossing of a black cat is a bad omen. Black cats are hunted down because of the incredibly old superstition: black cats bring bad luck. They have as much right to live freely without being cringed at as we do.

In this current study (16.0%) people believed that presence of widows on auspicious occasions bring bad luck. As much as they are considered foolish. Superstitions do affect the society a lot. For example, widow are considered to bring bad luck. At one point in India, windows couldn't get shelter and received harsh treatment.

In this study (64.0%) people believed that that cutting hair should be avoided on Tuesday. Pretty much like every other day of the week, Tuesday belong to a deity, Mangal (Mars) . Since Mangal is a hard-to-please planet, people are sacred of antagonizing the god by indulging in “inauspicious” acts like cutting their hair on Tuesday. In fact, barbershops remain closed on Tuesdays in many part of India. Apparently, hair has always been an irritant for Mangal. God forbid, if the deity is annoyed by your action, you may even lose your head.

Conclusion

Not surprisingly then that we Indians are labeled as being overly superstitions. Science is loosing the grip of beliefs. Sometimes the more things change, the more they remain the same. Many industries not only survive on superstitions, but foster them. The industries- flowers, paints , garments- thrives on beliefs that black is mournful, blue is gentle or yellow is wild. There is nothing black and white about superstitions, though they grey world of black magic is a dangerous and damaging one. If black cats could talk, they would boast about how they stop humans in their track. This is the age of knowledge, it is also the age of Aquarius . Logic and

intuition are no longer enemies. So why superstitions should be considered out of place in this age of nanotech and computers?

Without the knowledge of these superstitions, effective community participation cannot be achieved.

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Authors Column



Dr. Sartaj Ahmad is a medical sociologist with postdoctoral research experience coupled with experience in different fields of sociology and public health. He did Ph.D. in Medical Sociology from Ch. Charan Singh University Meerut UP India.

He was Research Investigator in many community based health projects of SIFPSA, NACO, ICMR, Population Council for five years. Presently he is faculty of Sociology in Swami Vivekananda Subharti University Meerut UP , India.

He published many research articles in the leading journals of Community Medicine and Sociology. He is member of Editorial board of reviewers for professional, International and National journal.