

From Tradition to Superstition: A Journey Through India's Folk Tales and Beliefs

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Abstract

Folklore in India has remained a source of Indigenous Knowledge. At its core, it inculcates Cultural Practices inspired from local wisdom and has contextual relevance. Many of these traditions had deep and sometimes very vital meaning in guiding day-to-day lives of the practitioners and also their spiritual domains. But as society evolves, science progresses, and culture morphs, many of these beliefs becomes outdated, turn eventually into superstitions.

This article, "From Tradition to Superstition: A Journey Through India's Folk Tales and Beliefs," explores eleven different ideas, practices or customs based on folk traditions that once held pragmatic or symbolic value but have now been misinterpreted or reinterpreted and have turned into superstitions. The chapter explores origins, purposes, and later evolution of these folk tales.

This article examines epistemological transformations that shaped indigenous knowledge. It explores the complexities of maintaining cultural wisdom in ways that do not uphold practices that are no longer rationalized or practical. This exploration provides perspective on how India's folk traditions figure into broader frameworks of cultural evolution and knowledge production.

Keywords: Folktales, Cultural Beliefs, Superstition, Collective Consciousness, Omens

The concepts of good omens and bad omens form the crux of folk tales, folklore, and folk beliefs. A good omen is something that contributes to our prosperity, whether monetary, physical, or psychological, while a bad omen signifies the opposite. Many day-to-day practices are believed to influence our fortune, either positively or negatively.

As human nature is fragile and prone to forgetfulness, we often overlook minor precautions and the dos and don'ts of daily life. This is where folk tales come to our rescue. Through their storytelling form, repetitive oral transmission, and ability to instill belief in omens, folk tales deeply embed themselves in the psyche, creating a collective consciousness and shaping behavioral patterns.

Problems arise, however, when significant social, economic, and technological changes occur, causing the contextual relevance of these tales to diminish. Over time, the logical basis of these tales weakens, leaving behind baseless beliefs. It is at this point that these tales transform into superstitions.

This article explores eleven such popular contemporary superstitions that are a part of Indian culture and once had a certain degree of rationality.

1. Don't Cross Roads after the Cats

Earlier, transportation alternatives were rather scarce, people traveled by foot, by a bullock cart or horse cart. The roads were a dangerous patch as travel path must cover forest area which could make one a prey to wild animals to dacoit. Especially at night, domestic cats, leopards, tigers etc. were a danger to society. To differentiate between the twinkle of a cat's eye and the predatory glare of a tiger lurking in the dark is not easy.

This formed the root of the superstition regarding a cat crossing one's path being an ill omen. It was more of a traveler's protection. Animals that belong to cat's family or felines ranges from a harmless domestic cat to predators like cheetah, Puma, Jaguar, Leopard, Lion, Tiger, Lynx, Caracal, Ocelot etc. The eyes of cats and other animals with a tapetum lucidum appear to glow in the dark because they reflect light. This phenomenon is called "eyeshine".

The twinkling eyes of a feline at night can be of a harmless cat to a bigger beasts and larger predators. The exact idea was to stop in one's place and wait until the beasts moved away, which ultimately saved the traveler from being in danger.

In a time when transportation was slower and more vulnerable, this superstition served a practical purpose—it helped to protect travelers from encountering dangerous animals in the night. However, with modern transportation systems, where people travel in fast, iron-clad vehicles, the superstition has lost its relevance. Today, it stands as a remnant of a past when the roads were a much more perilous place, and its original purpose no longer applies in our modern world.

2. Do not Sweep after the Sun Goes Down

The belief "Do not sweep after the sun goes down" originates from a time when oil lamps dimly lit homes, making it easy to lose small valuables like coins or jewelry while sweeping in the dark. This precaution was a practical safety measure, ensuring nothing important was discarded. Over time, however, this practical advice evolved into a superstition, with people believing that sweeping after dark would bring poverty or bad luck, despite no evidence to support such a claim. Today, with electric lighting eliminating poor visibility, the superstition persists as a cultural tradition, disconnected from its original, rational purpose.

3. Breaking a Mirror is Said to Bring Seven Years of Bad Luck

In the past, mirrors were considered immensely valuable asset in Indian households. They were not just mirrors, they were the epitome of beauty and wealth. A broken mirror wasn't simply a broken article, it was rather a lost good both in terms of the money used to purchase it as well as the time and energy dedicated to obtain it. Hence, with this understanding the

idea of breaking a mirror lasting seven years of bad luck was born as Such an event caused a great deal both emotionally and financially.

But more than the material loss, this belief stemmed from other factors as well. The shards of a broken mirror also act as a razor blade, can cut anything else in its path. Moreover, by any chance these shards fall into food, it can create disastrous health effects. It is no surprise that the fragments of those mirrors are in no way unarmful, they accentuate this superstition because it contributes to a much bigger notion that breaking a mirror is not a simple mistake to make it, is a prophecy that foretells doom.

This notion was not only a belief, because it made the person to be gentle with the things which were delicate. It instigated a sense of caution in the forbearers' actions, making them to practice care in their daily tasks. While the concept of bad luck may be ridiculous in the modern world, it was one of the essentials of the culture which existed in the past as a way of encouraging reverence on items which meant a lot to people and society. Even currently, the broken mirror tale remains showing how one ought to value and focus on the surround ones and those in their possession.

As years went by, the value placed on mirrors has also reduced but the superstition remains.

4. Hanging Lemon and Chilies Outside Shops

In rural India, where food stalls and small shops often faced challenges from pests and insects, a simple and effective solution was found in the combination of lemon and chilies. The acidic properties of the lemon and the sharp spiciness of the chili naturally repelled insects, creating a hygienic environment for food and goods. This practical remedy helped keep the spaces clean and free from pests, ensuring that food remained fresh and safe for consumption.

Over time, however, this practical measure transformed into something more mystical. As the years passed, people began to associate the lemon and chilies not just with pest control but with a protective force that kept away evil spirits and brought good fortune. Shopkeepers, especially, began to hang them at their entrances, believing that this ritual would shield their businesses from bad luck and misfortune. What had started as a perfectly reasonable and pragmatic way to avoid insects was now a superstition—a charm inviting prosperity and dispelling negative powers.

5. Eating Curd and Sugar Before an Exam

Curd and sugar have been savored in Indian culture for ages, both as cooling agents and an energy booster. Curd, being much lighter on the stomach than milk, is easily digestible, even in the hot season. It was always taken a glassful, not spoonful, so that one could feel refreshed and energised at the body level. This combination was especially liked before activities that demanded concentration and mental acuity, like studying or taking exams. The

cooling effect of curd helped soothe nerves, while the sugar provided a quick energy boost, making it the perfect meal to fuel both body and mind.

The practice, rooted in an extremely practical necessity for nourishment—curd kept the body fresh, agile, and free of the sluggishness that could derive from heavier foods like milk — offered all the energy that was needed to not weigh a body down to keep people alert and sharp. However, it was not so long before such a simple thing as consuming curd and sugar before exams developed new, mystical significance. It then became apparent to people that this ritual can guarantee success in their exams, turning a healthy nutritional practice into superstition. What once had nutritional benefits at its core turned into a receptacle for hopes of success in exams-what was once a simple and nourishing practice became an amulet that would ensure success in some way.

6. Don't Sleep with Your Head to the North

This belief is based on ancient Ayurvedic dogma and observations of the great scholars like Vagbhata, a notable Ayurvedic doctor. As per Ayurveda, the sleeping direction does affect the body energy balance and wellness. Vagbhata explained how an individual should blend their lifestyle with the Earth's magnetic pull and the cycles of nature. It was believed that sleeping in a head-to-north direction would disturb the body's alignment with the Earth's magnetic field and cause stress, poor circulation, and imbalances in vital energies.

The idea also relates to blood circulation. Ayurvedic doctors believed that the iron within the blood interacts with the magnetic field of Earth and causes some minute effects in the brain and heart when the head is directed northward. According to them, this can cause sleep disorder, headache, and even major diseases if the disturbance persists over a long period of time.

Modern interpretations of this belief often forget its origins. Over the centuries, the practice shifted into superstition, with some claiming that sleeping with the head to the north could bring death or misfortune. While these ominous warnings may lack scientific evidence, the ancient wisdom behind the practice was deeply tied to the understanding of health and natural harmony.

Even today, the advice still goes on to appeal to those in search of all-rounded well-being and reminds gently that our bodies are not cut off from their surroundings.

7. Touching Elders' Feet brings Fortune

The tradition of touching the feet of elders is a part of India's very cultural fabric. It symbolises respect, humility, and reverence for those who have walked life's path before us. The gesture, based on a hierarchical society, was more than just an act of etiquette. It was a

moral teaching. It reinforced values of obedience, respect, and acknowledgment of generational wisdom. In ancient times, the act of bowing down to one's elders was seen as an essential part of the grooming process, a way of instilling discipline and grounding in the younger generations.

Over the years, however, this tradition has evolved. In some regions, it has manifested itself as superstition. Touching the feet of elders is believed to bring good fortune. While this practice still retains the culture in its meaning, for others, it has been a ritualistic gesture, veiling much of its original meaning.

Beyond the physical act, this tradition also carries psychological significance. In the early stages of life, youth often rebel, asking questions and challenging authority. Asking questions is crucial to progress, but without understanding or finding the right answers, it can create chaos. By bowing and placing one's head at the feet of an elder, it's symbolic of placing one's ego aside. It is a conception that wisdom acquired by experience has its own power. The act relates that in the presence of wisdom, one humbly surrenders their ego, as there is much to learn.

Interestingly, this tradition also speaks to the idea that wisdom doesn't always come with age. In cases where a younger person carries deep wisdom—like a teacher, mentor, or guru—the respect is still paid, and the younger one may be honored by elders. It's not about bowing before age, but rather the wisdom that person carries. In doing so, this act encourages mental humility, psychological growth, and a balanced understanding of one's place in the world.

Again, it also has health benefits. The bending down and touching the feet of elders promotes flexibility and keeps one physically agile, reminding that respect is not just a cerebral exercise, but there is a strong re-enforcement of mind-body association in the act of reverence.

Ultimately, the gesture of touching feet is a show of respect toward the wisdom of elders and towards the process of learning and growth, making it much more than just a cultural ritual—it's an enduring symbol of humility, wisdom, and holistic well-being.

8. Cutting Nails After Sunset Brings Misfortune

The belief that cutting nails after sunset brings misfortune likely has its roots in practical concerns. In the past, when artificial lighting was unavailable or dim, using sharp tools at night posed a higher risk of injury. Poor visibility could lead to accidents or improperly trimmed nails, increasing the chance of infections.

Over time, this precautionary practice evolved into a superstition, emphasizing misfortune to ensure compliance. While modern lighting eliminates these risks, the belief persists in many cultures. The original stance was less about bad luck and more about promoting safety and mindfulness during daily grooming activities.

9. Whistling Indoors Attracts Ghosts.

Whistling indoors, especially after dark, had a very practical purpose in the past. Back then, when safety was a big concern and people often lived in quiet, remote areas, a whistle was a way to warn others. It could alert people to dangers like wild animals or intruders. At night, when everything was silent, the sharp sound of a whistle could travel far, warning nearby people to stay alert and be cautious.

Over time, the helpful behavior transformed into superstition. They came to believe that whistling inside during nighttime invited ghosts and spirits in. What had begun as protection or a signal of safety evolved to become related to fear about spirits. This signal for security and safety became one to invite dark, unexplained powers.

10. Water from a Copper Vessel Extends Life Span

Although later endorses for the health of drinking water from a copper vessel base their beliefs on the antimicrobial properties of copper, which had been discovered long before the theoretical framework of modern science validated them; back then, ancient civilization recognised them and utilised copper as a material when storing drinking water for purification and good health.

In the modern context, however, the belief has evolved into a superstition. While copper's health benefits are understood scientifically today, the practice has developed mysticism to it, with some believing that if one drinks water from a copper vessel, it can add a few more years of age and keep illness away. The practical health benefits have been pushed into the background by the aura of mysticism that follows the practice today.

11. Dancing a Leg Leads to Financial Loss

The belief that shaking a leg causes financial loss stems from practical concerns. Traditionally, it was seen as a sign of restlessness or imbalance, reflecting a lack of focus and composure. This behavior was associated with poor decision-making and carelessness, including in managing resources.

Over time, this cautionary observation transformed into a superstition, suggesting that shaking a leg directly brings bad luck and financial misfortune. What began as a cultural lesson to encourage mindfulness and self-control has evolved into an abstract fear. This shift highlights how practical advice can turn into generalised superstition over time.

Conclusion: The shift from tradition to superstition illustrates how cultural practices, once based on practicality, evolve into beliefs rooted in mysticism and fear. Many traditions began to address societal needs, ensure safety, or promote values. However, as contexts changed, their practical relevance faded, leaving behind superstitions. This highlights the balance between preserving cultural heritage and embracing modern rationality. While superstitions offer comfort or identity, reconnecting with the original wisdom is key. Understanding how traditions turned to superstitions helps us appreciate cultural evolution, allowing practices to adapt meaningfully to contemporary life while honouring the ingenuity of our ancestors.

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