

Research Paper

Correlates of Superstitious Belief among Young Adults in India

Ms. Srishti Chelwani^{1*}, Ms. Resham Agarwal², Mr. Samir Khan³

ABSTRACT

The objective of the present research is to understand whether superstitious beliefs vary across gender and religious beliefs; to understand whether there exists any relationship between superstitious beliefs, anxiety, and rational-experiential processing. To achieve this objective ex-post-facto design was adopted. The Indian Superstitious Scale, Rational-Experiential Inventory, and State-Trait Anxiety Inventory Scale for Adults (STAI-Y2) are used in this study. The data is analysed using IBM SPSS to test the probability of the hypotheses. The results indicated that there is no significant impact of trait anxiety and rational experiential processing on the attitude toward superstition. Superstitious beliefs do not vary significantly across gender. However, there was a significant variance in the degree of superstitious belief across religions in the selected sample. The Hindu participants were found to have the maximum number of superstitious beliefs and the atheists had the minimum numbers.

Keywords: *Superstitious Belief, Religion, Gender, Trait Anxiety, Rational-Experiential Processing*

Anti-superstition act comes into force in Karnataka (Gejji, 2020). “Boy succumbs to rabies due to his family’s superstition in Pune” (Isalkar, 2022), “If the state (Hyderabad) has to be developed and if we have to lift the state from backwardness, we will have to remove superstition from here,” Prime Minister Narendra Modi stressed (Vadlapatla, 2022). Superstition is something that has a strong influence in the Indian context. In our day to day life we come across various acts fueled by superstitions. Superstitions are beliefs that run counter to rational thought or are inconsistent with known laws of nature (Vyse, 1997). “Superstitions can be classified as either cultural or personal, and are invoked either to bring good luck or to fend off bad luck.” (Block & Kramer, 2008). It expresses the human being’s perennial and primitive situation, our profound sense of vulnerability in this world, and our belief that miracles may happen at any time, perhaps that we could, in little ways, even contribute to their happening. Superstition appears to be a trait shared by all human beings. (Chakrabarty, D., 2008).

Individuals indulge in superstitious behaviour and it plays a role in their everyday activities from going to an interview to buying something new for their household. One may wonder

¹Psychologist

²Psychologist

³Asst. Professor

*Corresponding Author

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how they learn the superstitious beliefs, no matter how irrational they may seem. (Taylor and Francis, 2021) According to Albert Bandura (Feist, 2020), many a time, we learn to model behaviours without actually questioning them and understanding the rationale of those actions. As children, we socially learn to follow adults and as adults, it seems easier to follow the established behavioural pattern rather than questioning them. Family, culture, religion etc. encourage and life experiences reinforce these superstitious beliefs. Later on in life, these beliefs may turn into reflexes or coping mechanisms. Here we attempted to find out whether our religious beliefs may actually cause differences in our superstitious beliefs.

"[Religion is] the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand about whatever they may consider the divine." (James, 2018). In 1915 sociologist Émile Durkheim defined Religion as "things that surpass the limits of our knowledge." Some people connect religion to buildings of worship, while others connect it to rituals, or ideas that influence how they live their daily lives. They can all agree that religion is a set of principles, practices, and beliefs that a person holds sacred or regards as having spiritual significance (McGivern, 2014). In India we have many religious practices that have seeped into superstitious beliefs. Religion also tends to set the premise for leading one's life; guidelines are also set, in the form of traditions, for different genders, ages and groups. Religion also bifurcates our roles and responsibilities according to our gender. The socially constructed qualities of men, women, girls, and boys are referred to as gender. This covers interpersonal connections as well as the standards, mannerisms, and roles that come with being a woman, man, girl, or boy. Gender is a social concept that differs from culture to culture and can evolve (World Health Organization, 2019). Since religion ascribes certain behavioural guidelines for both genders, here we are in search of any difference between men and women in terms of their superstitious beliefs.

Superstitious beliefs give humans a sense of security and control (Futrell, 2011). As a result, in moments when an individual goes through an anxious or uncertain situation in life, they try to pin their hopes on certain superstitious beliefs and by indulging in those behaviours will mend things in their favour and good things will occur. Hence, individuals use superstition as a coping mechanism for their anxiety-provoking thoughts. Failure to indulge in those ritualistic behaviours tends to induce uneasiness (Futrell, 2011). This uneasiness may as well be translated into anxiety, later. The consistent tendency to detect, experience, and communicate unfavourable feelings like fears, anxieties, and worry in a variety of contexts is referred to as trait anxiety. A consistent perception of environmental cues (events, other people's words) as threatening is a hallmark of trait anxiety (Gidron, 2013). Langer introduced the concept of the illusion of control through an experiment, explaining that individuals tend to overestimate their possibility of success if they feel that they have some dominance over the situation. When the control over an uneasy situation seems tough, it causes symptoms related to anxiety (Bandura, A. 1997), individuals will depend on superstitious belief to create an illusion of control (Rudski & Edwards, 2007). To understand this further a study suggested that patterns of rational beliefs and thinking are associated with trait anxiety (Himle et al., 1982). Robinson et al., 2013 stated that levels of anxiety have a significant impact on cognitive functions. Rational thinking is a tendency to make conclusions based on thoughtful, methodical, and logical reasoning, whereas an experiential thinking style favours making decisions based on gut instincts, feelings, and quick reactions. According to cognitive-experiential self-theory, our ability to reason follows a parallel dual processing paradigm that combines our logical and experiential systems (Epstein, 1994). This study explored how superstitious beliefs are questioned based on anxiety, rational thinking and experiential learning of an individual.

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To explore these dimensions an extensive review of literature was conducted to understand if superstitious beliefs vary across religion and gender and if trait anxiety and rational-experiential processing impacts superstitious beliefs of an individual.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Levitt (1952) postulated six criteria for defining a superstition: (1) fundamentally irrational; (2) popularly accepted and widely held belief; (3) usually influences the behaviour of the believer; (4) may be a conventionally sensible belief in supernatural phenomena; (5) has no sound evidence or personal experience to support it; and (6) may be spontaneous and spread without the sanction of authority. In psychology, researchers refer to superstition as a phenomenon exerting an imagined influence on an action or an outcome when no real causal relationship is apparent, or indeed present. Superstitious beliefs are those that cast doubt on the likelihood of unfavourable events occurring. People believe that by engaging in superstitious rituals, they may alter the path of strange events and behaviours.

Superstitions are linked to our cultural traditions, which have ingrained themselves into our natural or automatic responses in a variety of situations, so that rational thought does not necessarily ensure escape from superstition. (An, S. et al., 2019). Sieun, et al., came up with an Indian Superstition Scale to empirically measure the degree of superstitious beliefs in the Indian population. The scale was a 34-item scale for which factor analysis was done using 2 factors, factor 1: Influence on well-being and factor 2: symbolic prophecy. The internal consistency was done on factor 1 using a reliability test. Cronbach's alpha was 0.96, showing strong internal consistency. For factor 2 Cronbach's alpha was 0.78 after examining the reliability test. This also demonstrated adequate internal consistency. Both the factors were strongly correlated, $r = .61$, $n = 219$, $p < .001$. The discriminant validity test (Campbell & Fiske, 1959) resulted in 0.70 for the 2 factors. This was under the criterion value of 0.85 for meeting discriminant validity. The same has been used for the present study to measure one of the variables under consideration.

Superstitious beliefs could vary across gender also. Some studies (Zebb and Moore, 2003, Wiseman and Watt., 2004, Singh, et al., 2021) concluded that women have higher superstitious beliefs as compared to men. A study by Tahir T. B., 2018 among the rural population of Punjab in Pakistan suggested that women are more superstitious than men. Singh, et al. also suggested that greater age is associated with lower levels of superstition. The belief in superstition also varies across religions, Sieun An, et al. In 2019 concluded that Hindu participants in their study were more superstitious than Non-Hindu participants. (Sieun An, et al., 2019). To investigate the impact of superstition and the significance of superstition on a person's mental and physical health, a case study was carried out in 2003 in 17 countries using the International Social Survey Program (Religion II) (Torgler, 2003). It was discovered that there is a relationship between the variables of superstition and religion, as well as the future and belief in lucky charms. Singh, et al. In 2021 stated that superstition is more prevalent among people who identify as religious. According to the study, an increase in religiosity, lack of education and having a strong connection to their heritage are primary factors for superstitious beliefs. (Singh, et. al, 2021).

Superstitions could also be associated with trait anxiety as evidenced by a study conducted to understand this relationship. The results indicate a positive linear relationship between superstitious beliefs and anxiety symptoms. It also showed that women have superstitious beliefs and trait anxiety symptoms (Futrell, 2011). Research has shown evidence that superstitions reduce uncertainty-induced anxiety. However, it is also a predictor of death-

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related anxiety in the Chinese population (Wong, 2012). When it comes to anxiety and related disorders, superstitiousness is found to be nonspecific and related more to the perception of control than any specific form of psychological distress (Zebb and Moore, 2003). A study reported that individuals high on superstitious beliefs tend to indicate anxiety, depression, and worries (Sica et al., 2002). In the present study, an attempt is made to understand the relationship between trait anxiety of an individual as measured by the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (Y2 Form) and their degree of superstition. A review study done by Barnes and colleagues in 2002, examined articles reporting reliability for the STAI. The mean internal consistency was .91 for the state scale and .89 for the trait scale. The mean test-retest reliability for the trait scale was .88. The mean for the state scale was lower (.70), indicating the transitory nature of the measure. Developers Spielberger and colleagues have demonstrated good concurrent validity, as scores on the STAI correlate highly with results found on alternative anxiety measures like the Anxiety Scale Questionnaire (Barnes et al., 2002).

Epstein (1994) developed a dual-process theory named, Cognitive-Experiential Self Theory (CEST) to integrate multiple perspectives on personality. According to this theory, people process information through two qualitatively different cognitive systems. An experiential system, that is mostly preconscious and a rational system that is mostly conscious. The rational processing system is inferential, guided by culturally transmitted rules, and is characteristically slower, more systematic, primarily verbal, and relatively emotion-free. The experiential system is a preconscious learning system that is more rapid and automatic, holistic, primarily nonverbal, and emotional. In the present study, we aimed to find any association between these types of processing and superstitious belief. The REI-40 is characterised by four subscales: Rational Ability, Rational Engagement, Experiential Ability, and Experiential Engagement (Epstein, Pacini, & Norris, 1998; Pacini & Epstein, 1999) is used in the present study for the purpose. High internal consistency was reported, with Cronbach's alphas of .86 for rationality and .84 for experientiality and between .74 and .78 for the experientiality subscales. Good test-retest reliability of $r > .76$ supports CET's assertion that thinking styles are relatively stable personality traits. The REI-40 has been validated in various populations (e.g., undergraduate, age groups, occupations) and cultures (Zeigler-Hill & Shackelford, 2020, pp. 4291–4294)

The literature suggests that religious belief and religiosity both impact the degree of superstitious belief. However, the question remains, if the educated part of the society demonstrates a similar phenomena. The literature also suggests that variables do have an impact on superstitious beliefs, however the question remains, how superstitious beliefs vary across 4 different religions (Hindu, Islam, Sikh, Christian, Atheist) in India; whether education and gender also plays a role. The present study also explores the role of trait anxiety and rational-experiential processing in developing superstitious beliefs. The study is an effort to understand the combined interaction of these variables on superstitious beliefs.

METHODOLOGY

Objective

1. To understand whether superstitious beliefs vary across gender and religious beliefs.
2. To understand whether there exists any relationship between superstitious beliefs, anxiety, and rational-experiential learning.

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To meet the objective of the research following hypotheses were tested

Hypotheses:

- HO1: There is no significant variance in superstitious beliefs across gender
- HO2: There is no significant variance in superstitious beliefs across religion
- HO3: There is no significant correlation between superstitious beliefs and trait anxiety
- HO4: There is no significant correlation between superstitious beliefs and rational ability
- HO5: There is no significant correlation between superstitious beliefs and rational engagement
- HO6: There is no significant correlation between superstitious beliefs and experiential ability
- HO7: There is no significant correlation between superstitious beliefs and experiential engagement
- HO8: There is no significant difference between Hindus and Muslims in terms of their degree of superstitious belief.
- HO9: There is no significant difference between Hindus and Christians in terms of their degree of superstitious belief.
- HO10: There is no significant difference between Hindus and Sikhs in terms of their degree of superstitious belief.
- HO11: There is no significant difference between Hindus and Atheists in terms of their degree of superstitious belief.
- HO12: There is no significant difference between Muslims and Christians in terms of their degree of superstitious belief.
- HO13: There is no significant difference between Muslims and Sikhs in terms of their degree of superstitious belief.
- HO14: There is no significant difference between Muslims and Atheists in terms of their degree of superstitious belief.
- HO15: There is no significant difference between Christians and Sikhs in terms of their degree of superstitious belief.
- HO16: There is no significant difference between Christians and Atheists in terms of their degree of superstitious belief.
- HO17: There is no significant difference between Sikhs and Atheists in terms of their degree of superstitious belief.

Variables

Independent variable-

- Gender
- Religion
- Rational-Experiential Processing
- Trait-Anxiety

Dependent variable-

- Superstitious Beliefs

Tools

- The Indian Superstitious Scale, 2019, Sieun An, et.al
- Rational Experiential Inventory, 2017, Shaughan A. Keaton
- State-Trait Anxiety Inventory Scale for Adults (STAI-Y2), Charles D. Spielberger

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Design

Ex-post-facto Design: The study is ex-post-facto as the superstitions are already embedded in individuals. An attempt is made to find out any variance between superstitious beliefs and gender, religion, and the correlation between trait anxiety and rational-experiential processing.

Sampling

For data collection, non-probability convenience and purposive sampling was used. The sample consisted of N= 247 with Males (N=56) and females (N=176). The religion was divided into 5 categories- Hindu (N=160), Muslim (N=25), Christianity (N=32), Sikh (N=4), and Atheist (N=11). The sample varied across the ages of 18-42 years. One short (general health questionnaire-WHO) GHQ-12 was used to screen for any chronic physical and psychological illnesses. The data was collected via online questionnaires. The samples chosen for this research included individuals between the age of 18-30 years who had a good comprehension of the English language along with being a resident of Indian Nationality. Gender and religious beliefs of the Indian population were included. Individuals having a chronic physical and psychological illness or illiterate population were excluded from the study. The population that is below the age of 18 and above the age of 30 was not included, also, NRIs and non-Indian Nationals were not considered for the study.

- **Inclusion criteria-** Individuals between the age of 18-30 years, had a good comprehension of the English language along with being a resident Indian National. All gender and religious beliefs from the Indian population were included.
- **Exclusion criteria-** Individuals below the age of 18 years and above the age of 30 years, NRI and non-Indian Nationals, Individuals having a chronic physical and psychological illness, and illiterate individuals.

RESULTS

Table 1: Distribution of the Sample

Table 1.1: Gender

Gender	Male	Female	Total
No. of Participants	56	176	232

Table 1.2: Religion

Religion	Atheist	Hindu	Muslim	Sikh	Christian
No. of Participants	11	160	25	4	32

Table 1.3: Education Qualification

Qualification	High-School	College- Graduate	Post Graduation	Other
No. of Participant	8	130	83	11

Table 1.4: Age

Range	18-43 years
Median	21 years

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Table 2: Difference in mean scores of ISB across Gender and Religion (Mann-Whitney U Test and Kruskal-Wallis Test)

	Significance	Decision
Gender	0.175	Retain the null hypothesis (HO1)
Religion	0.01	Reject the null hypothesis (HO2)

Table 2.1: Probability Value for Test of Mean Difference (Mann-Whitney U Test and Independent Sample T-Test)

	Hindu	Muslim	Christian	Sikh	Atheist
Hindu	-	P=0.73	P=0.006*	P=0.915	P=0.001*
Muslim	-	-	P=0.057	P=1.000	P=0.011*
Christian	-	-	-	P=0.128	P=0.34
Sikh	-	-	-	-	P=0.56
Atheist	-	-	-	-	-

Hypothesis Accepted: HO8, HO10, HO12, HO13, HO15, HO15, HO16, HO17

Hypothesis Rejected: HO9 (Christian<Hindu), HO11 (Atheist<Hindu), HO14

(Atheist<Muslim)

Table 3: Correlation

Table 3.1: Multiple Correlation

Dependent Variable: Superstitious Beliefs	R= 0.25
Independent Variable: Trait Anxiety, Rational Engagement, Rational Ability, Experiential Engagement, and Experiential Ability	R ² = 0.062 F= 1319.462 Significance= 3.019

Table 3.2: Bivariate Correlation

	Superstitious Beliefs (r)	Significance (P)	Hypothesis (accepted/rejected)
Trait Anxiety	0.043	0.514	HO3 accepted
Rational Engagement	-0.197	0.005	HO5 accepted
Rational Ability	-0.183	0.005	HO5 accepted
Experiential Engagement	0.024	0.713	HO7 accepted
Experiential Ability	0.054	0.409	HO6 accepted

DISCUSSION

Superstition is an unconscious prejudice that is developed through non-cognitive repetition and is a culturally transmitted behaviour habit. According to human neuroscience, non-human animals' reward circuits are analogous to our own. Depending on personal preferences, we select the action that has the highest subjective value to execute (Bernacer & Murillo, 2014). People become less superstitious when the occurrences can be explained, the surroundings are clear, and the circumstances are less unclear (Hamerman, 2010). We frequently associate committed behaviours with particular outcomes and conclude these relationships. The importance of this synchrony between action and result increases with repetition, which strengthens the belief. Studies by Skinner on pigeons and food (Skinner, 1948), as well as those by Wagner and Morris on kids (Wagner & Morris, 1987), demonstrate how synchronicity mechanisms can lead to the development of superstitious beliefs. Different factors influence a person's propensity toward superstition. So, from the perspectives of behavioural biology, cultural transmission, and our interactions with the environment,

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superstition may be explained. Superstition develops as a result of conditioning. Superstition is more common in difficult or stressful circumstances (Mandal F.B., 2018).

The research was conducted to find out if the gender and religion of an individual impact the degree of their superstitious beliefs, along with understanding how the level of anxiety and rational-experiential learning is associated with their superstitious beliefs. Earlier studies suggested that women are slightly more superstitious than men (Wiseman and Watt, 2004) (Tahir T.B., et al., 2018) and that Hindus are more superstitious than non-Hindus (Sieun An, et al., 2019). Since there was insufficient research into the Indian context, we have attempted to find out if the same results persist in different samples.

A total number of 232 individuals participated in the study; of them, 56 were male and 176 were female (Table 1.1). All the participants belonged to four major religious backgrounds, i.e., Hindu (N=160), Christian (N=32), Muslim (N=25), Sikh (N=4), and Atheist (N=11) (Table 1.2). The academic qualifications of the participants were High school graduates (N=8), College Graduates (N=130), Post-Graduation (N=83), and others (N=11) e.g., diploma, certification courses (Table 1.3). The age range for the sample was 18-43 years old with a median age of 21 years (Table 1.4).

Results indicated no significant variance ($F= 0.175$) in superstitious beliefs across gender (Table 2). Hence, men and women are equally superstitious in the present sample. There is a significant variance ($F=0.01$) in superstitious beliefs across religions (Table 2). The superstitious belief varies across certain religions (Table 2.1); Christian < Hindu ($P=0.006^*$), Atheist < Hindu ($P=0.001^*$), and Atheist < Muslim ($P=0.011^*$). The superstitious beliefs do not vary across certain religions (Table 2.1), Muslim and Hindu ($P=0.73$), Christian and Muslim ($P=0.057$), Sikh and Hindu ($P=0.915$), Sikh and Muslim ($P=1.000$), Sikh and Christian ($P=0.128$), Atheist and Christian ($P=0.34$) and Atheist and Sikh ($P=0.56$).

The bivariate correlation (Table- 3.2) suggests Trait Anxiety ($r=0.043$, $P=0.514$), Experiential Engagement ($r=0.024$, $P=0.713$), and Experiential Ability ($r=0.054$, $P=0.409$) are not associated with the degree of superstitious beliefs; Rational Engagement ($r=-0.197$, $P=0.005$) and Rational Ability ($r=-0.183$, $P=0.005$), suggesting that the negative correlation of rational ability and experience with superstitious belief may be indicative of some underlying causal factor, however, it is not so strong and may require further investigation.

The results partly contradict the past findings. There was no significant variance in superstitious beliefs across gender in this study, contradicting the findings of past research (Wiseman and Watt, 2004) (Tahir T.B., et al., 2018). This contradiction might have taken place due to the difference in sample demography; the sample for the study by Tahir T.B., et al., 2018 belonged to the rural area whereas the sample for the present research belongs to the urban area. The results are in contradiction with the findings of Futrell (2011) which indicated a positive linear relationship among superstitious beliefs and anxiety symptoms. However, a significant variance is found in superstitious belief across religions, which is in line with the findings of some past research (Sieun An, et al., 2019). Other possible factors for these findings could be educational qualification, socio-economic background, and age-related factors.

The findings are indicative of a complex interaction between religious beliefs and rational ability and rational engagement. There may be certain religious factors that imbibe more superstitious beliefs within individuals, than others. However, it may be the rational ability

and engagement of the individual, that determine to what extent they may harbour superstitious beliefs. In the case of an urban, well educated population, where both genders go through similar life experiences and it is not solely affected by their religious faith, they may possess a similar degree of superstitious beliefs. Anxiety may not be a significant factor that leads to reliance on superstitious belief to cope with uncertainty about the future. Experiential learning and engagement may have little to do with superstitious belief, as it is not always a negative or positive experience that embeds superstition in our mind; sometimes we may learn these beliefs just by modelling the behaviours of significant others or role models.

Suggestions for future research

This brings us to a crossroads with previous studies and future research may mitigate the contradictions. Further research may be pursued to identify the factors and experiences related to the development of superstitious beliefs. We believe a case study method would be more suitable to discover the underlying factors. Identifying these factors would help us formulate strategies either to eradicate superstition or at least minimise its negative effects. A diverse sample may be surveyed to understand the sociocultural nuances that may be the source of differences in the degree of superstitious beliefs. A study can also be conducted to explore the impact of individuals practising interfaith along with understanding the role of the degree of religious beliefs an individual holds with the degree of superstitious belief.

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Conflict of Interest

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