

View Point

Belief System and Health

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Do we require God to live a good moral and rational life? Do we require the help of God to be healthy and happy or provide healthcare to suffering people? Do we require God to have good governance? Do we require God for a free and secular society? Is God just an idea? The belief system affects the health action of a human being therefore, it is always a subject of discussion among all societies in the world.

Secularisation implies the progress of society towards modernisation and rationalisation and the loss of authority of religion in all aspects of social life and governance. Secularisation of health means demystifying, rationalising, and adopting scientific processes for gaining health. It removes all misconceptions, myths, and religious belief systems that are associated with diseases and health, which means practising evidence-based medicine and public health. A community will not become healthy till all risk factors are rooted out. These risk factors are poverty, poor education, degradation of the environment, poor sanitation and water supply, inequity in healthcare, casteism, corruption, defective lifestyles, drug use, gender inequality, unplanned urbanisation, religious practices, and belief systems. Religious practices, myths, and belief systems are more related to poor literacy. All these factors are interrelated and create a web of causation of human suffering.

Most educational institutions have failed to fulfil their constitutional duties to promote scientific temper, humanism, and a spirit of inquiry and reform. Even medical institutions continue to believe that prayers to God and faith healing are effective in the treatment of illness. Most health professionals believe in miracles and that Godmen are capable of performing such miracles.

Three incidences reported from national dailies indicate how beliefs in religion are the driving force behind such inhuman acts:

1. A couple, both professionals in a medical college in Haryana, sacrificed their son for another son who was not performing well in academics on the call of a tantric.
2. While performing a *hawan*, a small child got burned sitting in front of the *hawan* fire. Instead of going to the hospital, the parents rushed to a *tantric* first and then to a Kali temple which was 30 km away from their home from East Delhi to South Delhi crossing more than 8–10 hospitals. On the way, the child died. The child could have survived if he/ she was taken to a hospital.

3. A 64-year-old beheaded at the Kamakhya Temple in Assam state's capital Guwahati as an "offering" to the temple goddess.¹

Thousands of women have been killed as a result of being branded as witches.^{2,3} Many *Babas*, *Devis*, and *Tantrics* practice freely in India and suggest sacrificing animals, birds, and children to gain wealth, health, and power. As a human society, we have no courage to question illogical methods of treatment and management of our problems. We are unable to prevent any claim made by mysterious *Babas*, Godmen, and faith healers to cure the problems. India remains at the top of the list of countries having faith healers, *tantrics*, unqualified doctors, and quacks freely practising their system of medicine. They are powerful because of their support to politicians in fooling people through their tricks. They provide expert opinions to politicians and businessmen on running businesses, remaining healthy during their stressful lives, and even running the country.

The construction of temples and worshipping structures all over the places including parks, hospitals, and school premises is an indicator of the desecularisation of health. Having a temple promotes religion and undermines the scientific development and efforts of medical staff, including medical experts. Unfortunately, plastering the god's figure in tiles in corridors and stairs of government hospitals is the recent addition to this desecularisation. Our medical colleges and hospitals are run by the temple and church management committees where Godly methods are promoted instead of scientific methods for the treatment of illnesses.

Over a while, the concept of god has changed from an organised system of beliefs and faith to personalised belief; from multi-religious individual Gods to an omnipotent entity. Except for a few countries, most are moving towards a scientific and rational society. This is a good development in the world. However, a few people in some countries are still trying to maintain their power structure using particular religious and political supremacy. They promote myths, fear of gods, and religions, and distort history, scientific facts, and philosophy. Greedy and power-seeking individuals keep manipulating or exploiting common people in the name of God, religion, and the protection of race. They propagate ignorance and create poverty and hunger.

"Myth" usually refers to a story of forgotten or vague origin, basically religious or supernatural, that seeks to explain or rationalise one or more aspects of the society or world. The study of myth must not and cannot be separated from the study of religion, religious beliefs, or religious rituals.⁴ Belief is usually defined as a conviction of the truth of a proposition without its verification; therefore, a belief is a subjective mental interpretation derived from

perception, contemplation (reasoning), or communication. Belief is always associated with a disavowal of reality. The renunciation of belief is then an educational task and a psychological struggle, both liable to encounter much resistance. Delusions are false beliefs and judgments of external reality. Many (if not all) faith-based religious beliefs are delusional beliefs.^{5,6} Myths and beliefs are also responsible for practices that could be harmful to both health and wealth. To damage the scientific temper, greedy people fund academic bodies to prove that religion is a real necessity for human beings and their health. Scientific studies are funded to prove that prayer, *pooja* or *hawan* can reduce bad influences and ghosts. *Pandits/ tantrics/ ojhas* are socially accepted practitioners in India. Such belief systems in all sections of society prevent patients from coming forward to seek proper medical help when they suffer from abnormal behaviours or illnesses. Belief is the driving force to take action for health or against illness in human beings.

Lack of awareness and scientific facts lead to stigma and misconceptions in the general population. When people fall sick, they are ignored, isolated, or taken to sorcerers and faith healers and treated with rituals rather than with appropriate medications. Faith healers become important healthcare providers, especially among less privileged and less resourceful people.⁷ The majority of people believe in supernatural powers as the causative agents of their suffering.

Myths are more prevalent for diseases that are incurable and chronic in their characteristics such as mental illness, diabetes, tuberculosis, leprosy, and physical and mental disabilities, for example, there are various myths regarding the causes of mental illness. Bad parenting, air pollution, loss of semen, poor diet, past sin, curse of God, and evil eye are some of the important myths related to its causation. People usually do not accept the medical reasons for mental disorders which is why they always criticise medical treatment modalities particularly, electro-convulsive therapy.⁸⁻¹²

Myths and misconceptions about illness contribute to the stigma, which leads many people to be ashamed and prevents them from seeking help. Stigma is something about a person that causes her or him to have a deeply compromised social standing and a mark of shame or discredit, for example, people who have mental disorders are considered lazy, unintelligent, worthless, stupid, unsafe to be with, violent, always in need of supervision, possessed by demons, recipients of divine punishment, unpredictable, unreliable, irresponsible, without conscience, incompetent to marry and raise children, unable to work, affect rich people, increasingly unwell throughout life, and in need of hospitalisation.¹³ Unfortunately, such misconceptions

remain predominant in people who are supposed to deliver healthcare services like doctors and nurses.^{14,15} This happens despite effective treatment for almost all mental illnesses. Worse, the stigma experienced by people with a mental illness can be more destructive than the illness itself. Widespread social stigma, myths, and adverse belief systems regarding illnesses cannot be removed by just increasing public awareness because the widespread propaganda of the validity of religious methods to cure these problems goes on side by side.

The American Humanist Association (AHA) stated that humanism is a progressive lifespan that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead meaningful, ethical lives capable of adding to the greater good of humanity.¹⁶ Humanism is a rational philosophy informed by science, inspired by art, and motivated by compassion. Affirming the dignity of each human being, it supports the maximisation of individual liberty and opportunity consonant with social and planetary responsibility. It advocates the extension of participatory democracy and the expansion of the open society, standing for human rights and social justice. It recognises human beings as a part of nature and holds those values - religious, ethical, social, or political - as their source in human experience and culture.

With humanism, all social barriers like discrimination, violence against women, gender bias, religious wars, casteism, etc. can be eliminated. It calls upon a participatory political system with equal distribution of resources thereby reducing the wealth gap and promoting rational thinking and human rights. For this reason, humanism needs to be inculcated in every person in the world on an urgent basis.

No human being can remain happy and progress if he/ she is not in harmony and peace. When humanism prevails, people are happy and progressive. When you care for human beings, you start looking at all those factors which are responsible for human health and happiness such as environmental health protection and preservation of animals and birds. It can only happen when you have planetary humanism and universal humanism.

Healthy or beneficial beliefs can be created among people by developing social and psychological institutions. Consistent efforts, innovations, scientific development, and human evolution should be directed toward natural humanism.

Conflict of Interest: None

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