

Science, Scientists and superstition: Perspectives in Indian context

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Abstract. *Over the past few decades, there has been an appreciable increase in efforts at science popularization by media persons, as well as professional scientists. This principally involves efforts in two directions: the first is to make scientific know how accessible to a layman, and the second is to develop scientific temper. Any idea or theory that cannot be tested using the Scientific method may be termed as superstition. Many rationalist organizations have put in great amounts of time and effort, to fight superstition.*

The plethora of books and articles in newspapers and magazines, and the unprecedented impact of television, has made it possible today for one to talk about the Pathfinder mission to Mars, "Chandrayaan" or the cloning without committing a faux pas. In the second aim, there has been only a limited success. This article tries to identify some of the failures of the science popularization in developing a scientific attitude among laypersons, and the reasons behind them. Another important point about science for the people movements: In the absence of regular schools which can teach elementary science in a non-religious idiom, all the many campaigns to "bring science to the people" are mere band-aids.

In the scientific framework, there is no fundamental difference. In science, no belief exists that is absolute, except of course the implicit belief in the universal validity of the scientific method. Superstition baiters should take a more pragmatic approach to realising their goals. Scientists try to propagate the greatness of their beliefs, when all they should be propagating, is the greatness of their method. All they end up transmitting, is the greatness of their persona. Is this distortion of the message occurring due to the limitations of the scientist or her audience?

The old held notion that a great popularizer could overcome these barriers to communication successfully, and transmit the idea of the scientific method, to a layperson. Nehru's words, written in stone at the entrance to the Jawaharlal Nehru Institute for Advanced Research in Bangalore: "I too have worshipped at the shrine of science" are an irony to this context. The notion of "worship" and "shrine of science" do not get along with the modern science and the scientific temper.

Keywords. Science Communication, Science, Superstitions, Society, Development

Importance of the Study

Science is about finding truth. But science in India is largely seen as an instrument that enhances productive capabilities, and not as a transformational tool for creating an educated, informed and rational society. So far the communication has tended to be one way – scientists informing the public about their findings. The current thinking is for science to engage more in dialogue with the public, asking for feedback and views, and taking those views into consideration.

Methodology

The present study is based on the survey of scientists who are working for the cause of bridging the gap between science and society as no society can flourish and develop unless the shackles of superstition are broken and there would be no better than scientist himself as communicator who works for this cause.