CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Source and Significance

The history of civilisation is partly the story of man's continuous struggle to free his thought process from the influence of magic and superstition. Illness was attributed to sorcery and failure of crops to angry gods or malignant demons. Human sacrifice was thought to promote victory over war and fertility of the soil. The eclipses and comets were held to presage disaster. The life of the savage was hemmed in tabus and the consequences of infringing a tabu was thought to be frightful.¹ So long as disease and death, famine and pestilence, thunder and lightning were ascribed to the working of the evil spirits or similar mysterious forces man could not attain mastery over his environment. It is the slow but the consistent attempt to understand the natural phenomenon through objective observation, experimentation and rigorous reality-oriented thought process that has enabled man to predict and to some extent control the occurrence of physical and social phenomenon.

The method of science is not a fixed thing but a continuous process. Science does not begin during the 18th or the 20th century. Even during the stone age man had his scientific tools and techniques, however crude they might have been. In fact the bow and the arrow of the stone ages could represent the first utilisation by man of mechanically stored energy. It was the astronomy and the primitive medicine of the Hellenistic period that subsequently developed into the modern astrology and medicine. As Russel asserts the Babylonians were able to predict the occurrences of Eclipses. The Pythagoreans very shortly after this time discovered the correct theory of both solar and lunar eclipses and inferred that the earth is a sphere, from the shape of its shadows on the moon. It was the continuous revision and the reformation of the earlier theories, often contaminated, though they were with magical and superstitious elements, in the light of new experiences, that has resulted in the modern science. And this process of reformulation and revision is continuous. But in the modern world scientific practices have become more systematised, rigorous and institutionalised. Man is now in a better position to sift fact from fancy, objective ideas from subjective experiences, to engage in more rigorous and logical thinking. He has now better facilities to work out the implications of his theories and hypotheses, through ingenious instruments and controlled experimentation.

It is fitting to speak of every human cognitive reaction - perception, imagination, thinking, reasoning and theorising as an effort after meaning.\(^1\) All beliefs including those relating to superstition may serve important functions for the individual. They could give continuity to his personality and give meaning to his daily perceptions and activities. The most fascinating thing about the belief system is that it seems to be constructed to serve two masters at once - to understand the world in so far as possible and to defend against it.\(^2\) Primitive man threatened by the phenomena around him had to take an easy refuge in superstitious beliefs. In fact it was his attempt, however crude, it may be, to understand the world and render his experience more meaningful and logical. The scientist is also doing the same thing. But his attempt is more consistent, logical and meaningful. A man's cognitive functioning is not a thing apart from his affective emotional life.\(^3\) That one's anxiety and tensions and the hidden longings and value orientations may enter into even one's scientific theories, has been well attested to by


the life of several scientists.\(^1\) Stubborn adherence to one's own theories even in the face of increasing exceptions and conflicting facts and the selective suppression and avoidance of conflicting evidences indicate that superstitious thinking is not confined only to primitive minds. The rival theories and the hypotheses that abound in the social sciences and the increase in the number of socio-political utopias indicate the same defensive manoeuvre and selective perception. That the myth of racial superiority and similar unfounded beliefs could find its adherence even among the scientists, indicate that the tendency to regress to superstitious mode of thinking is strong in most of us.

It is rather difficult to define adequately scientific theories and superstitious beliefs and draw a dividing line between the two. Just as even the most superstitious notions may have an element of scientific truth about it, even the most scientific theories of the modern scientist may be coloured by his biases and preconceived notions. Both science and the superstitious beliefs are the attempts of man to understand the world and the events in it. Both point out some relationship between things and events. In superstition the relationship posited may be superficial as in the case of homeopathic magic suggested by Fraser.\(^2\) This does not mean that all superstitious beliefs especially those relating to primitive medicine are

without an element of truth. But so long as they are held as esoteric knowledge and not meant for public communication and not subjected to experimental verification and validation they are entitled to receive only the status of superstition.

The way in which a belief system is handed down to succeeding generation may be itself be indicative of its scientific status. Authority and personal experiences were the only source of knowledge till the dawn of modern scientific age.¹ The mode of transmission of ideas could also distinguish scientific truth from superstitious beliefs. Superstitious beliefs have often the compelling power of the irrational superego coming as they are along with parental commands and prohibitions. To question the superstitious beliefs handed down to us from our parents is tantamount to questioning the authority of the parents with its dire consequences. In fact some of the researches carried out by Whiting goes to prove the relationship between belief in sorcery and the nature of super-ego.² Authority was once the chief source of knowledge and still continues to be an important source. But uncritical acceptance of even scientific theories basing them on the authority of the scientist could itself be characterised as a superstitious attitude.


Science means more and more functional relationship and more and more successful approximation to truth. Relationships suggested through science are amenable to modifications and revisions in the light of new experience and contradictory evidences. Scientific enquiry is free and unrestrained by any initial adherence to dogmas or orthodoxy in pursuing its own course in its search for truth. The scientist challenges the method by which he arrived at the truth. He critically and systematically repeats observations and devices and special tools for taking, recording and analysing his observations. He thoroughly scrutinises the thought process by which he passes from one step of his logic to another. The scientific method has proved itself to be extra-ordinarily successful in realising the goal of explaining natural events in terms of its concepts and schemes, in predicting the probable source of future events within reasonable time and probability, and in verifying hypotheses through observation and experiment and in controlling and interpreting phenomena for specific human purpose.

It cannot be denied that unless the people, especially the younger generation, become more scientific in their attitudes, beliefs and practices, India's industrial and scientific development will be seriously hampered. It is the younger generation


who have to shoulder the responsibility of initiating the industrial and scientific revolution. It is in this context that the critical study of the beliefs and the practices of the high school pupils assumes much importance. The nature and extent of the various superstitious beliefs that are prevalent among the younger generation could indirectly indicate the scientific temper of the people. Since the difference between rational and irrational beliefs is only a question of degree scientific study of superstition cannot but take us to the crucial problem of critical thinking and rational judgement. For solving the innumerable problems that confront the nation in the field of education, industry or administration traditional beliefs and preconceived notions have to be set aside. Acceptance of superficial similarities and relationships between events and phenomenon will hamper scientific exploration which alone could promote industrial development in India.

Besides scientific and industrial development the social and the political evolution of the country in the right lines pre-suppose a scientific approach to all social problems. Our country is at present undergoing a period of cultural and economic transition. A multiplicity of creeds, beliefs and socio-political theories exercise their influence upon the minds of the youth in the country. Both religious fanaticism and ultra-modern socio-political radicalism find its adherents among the younger generation. It is estimated that there had
been nearly 4000 instances of student disturbances during the year 1971-’72 alone. Behind the behaviour of the students we could perceive a host of unverified beliefs relating to caste, community, religion, language and political ideologies. There is a strong tendency in the youth to attribute causes to social phenomenon on the basis of superficial similarities. Since verification and experimentations are more difficult in the social sciences superstitious beliefs abound in the social milieu. Unless more and more functional relationships are posited to explain the pressing social problems the youth of the country may be wasting their energy on superstitious social beliefs. Rigorous and critical examination of one’s beliefs especially those bearing on social, political, economic and educational problems (by the younger generation) may go a long way to tackle the problem of student unrest in India. They spring to a great extent from the unverified superstition-ridden notion of the social phenomenon. It is against this background that the scientific study of the superstitious beliefs prevalent among the youth against a wider perspective of theories relating to belief formation and belief change assumes much importance.

Scientific unbiased critical study of the prevalent beliefs among the adolescents may help us to understand the very process of belief formation and belief change. In fact both primitive superstitious and modern socio-political theories may be interrelated in their functional aspects and the study
of the former cannot but enlighten us regarding the latter. The formation of beliefs is an inevitable consequence of the operation of all the factors making for perceptual and cognitive organisation—-to know the characteristics of beliefs and the role they play in personality is to know a great deal about the adolescent. It may enable us to understand the actions of the adolescent in society. If we are to predict the behaviour of people over an extended period of time and control the actions, we must know something about the development of belief system and the process involved in belief change. A complete picture of man's belief about the attitude towards various aspects of the social life will yield highly reliable predictions about his behaviour in various social situations. Since a comprehensive theory of belief formation should cover within its scope prejudice, stereotypes, superstitions, delusion and scientific knowledge, understanding of the factors and the forces that lead to belief formation and belief change relating to superstition cannot but deepen our understanding of the total personality development and adjustment of pupils.

One of the most important functions of present-day education is the development of a scientific frame of mind. The progress of science is marked not by the accumulation of facts but by the emergence of scientific method and of the scientific attitude. It can loosen the bonds of dogmatism

and act as a powerful destroyer of fear, superstition, fatalism and passive resignation. But its emphasis on reasoning and free enquiring it can help to loosen ideological tension which often arises because of fanatical adherence to dogmas and theories. Superstitious thinking and the scientific temperament may not go together. Education, especially science education should develop the skill in scientific thinking and problem solving and help children to transfer this process to all areas of living. The younger generation should be led to appreciate the beauty of the scientific method and its superiority over blind belief and unverified notions. Teachers should not only be free from superstitious beliefs but should have an insight into the mode of thinking of the majority of the pupils. Unless the teacher is aware of the existing beliefs, however unfounded they are, he may not be able to start a dialogue with pupils, encouraging them to direct the spirit of scientific enquiry and verifiability to their inherited belief systems. The children can be made to know the nature and the origin of superstitious beliefs and the skill for scientific verification of beliefs can be developed in them.

It is rather difficult to believe that the march of scientific advance has resulted in a corresponding reduction of superstitious beliefs. There is abundant evidence to prove that man is still susceptible to hoaxes and irrational fears. The popularity of astrology and palmistry and other occult
subjects even among the educated subjects needs no elaboration. Some of the old superstitions have been exploded by science and there are hundreds and thousands of subjects who are not aware of such exposure. Moreover as Maple says we accept new superstitions and discard old ones. Very few people are consistently scientific in their attitudes and values in all areas of living. A scientist may develop the most complicated computer and still drop some salt over his left shoulder if he spits it at the table, or walks around the black cat, or refuses the third light in a match or whatever it is that he harbours in the way of superstitious hangover. A man's personal feelings and philosophy of life may even enter into his theories.

Moreover very little logical thinking goes on in the majority of people if they can possibly avoid it. Superstitions abound when the individual's security is threatened. In the modern world there are many things such as war and conflicts to strike terror into the minds of the people. Under such circumstances the lure of superstition is likely to become all the more powerful.

The first attempt to collect the superstitious beliefs prevalent in South India was made by E. Thurston in


1909 and 1912. Again M.J. Walhouse in 1876, Logan in 1887, N. Sankunny Wariar in 1892, Gopala Panikkar in 1900 and M.N. Venkata Swami in 1905 had also made some attempts in this field. But no attempt so far has been made on scientific lines to survey and analyse the superstitious beliefs prevalent among the younger generation of Kerala. Kerala is the southern most state in India, has an area of 15,002 sq. miles and a population of 2,12,80,397 (as per 1971 census). As Sreedhara Menon asserts Kerala has the distinction of being an independent geographical unit and political entity from very early days. Its geographical position and its peculiar physical features have invested Kerala with a distinct individuality. At the same time it had been through the ages an integral part of the Indian sub-continent and its history is part of the general history of India and its culture is one of the major streams that have enriched the composite culture of India. Several factors have played their

2. M.J. Walhouse, "Ind.Amt.", 1876.
4. N. Sankunny Wariar, "Ind.Amt.", 1892.
part in the cultural evolution of Kerala and these might have influenced the myths and fables and the total belief system of the people. The Portuguese and the Dutch who came to Kerala during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries have left their impress. There are many words in Malayalam with Portuguese origin. The Tamil art and literature have also made definite contribution to Malayalam language and literature. Kerala is the meeting place of the three great religions of the world -- Hinduism, Islam and Christianity and all these factors might have influenced the people, their customs, traditions, ways of living and believing. According to latest census Kerala could rank as the most literate state in India (literacy 60.16%).

It is also seen that there are 1399 high schools and with a high school going population of 7,30,886 pupils in Kerala. Kerala was the first state in India to form a Marxist dominated government. It is at present undergoing a period of rapid socio-political change. The school going and the college going population are fast becoming a dynamic force deciding the nature and direction of the socio-political and cultural change. Dynamic socio-political changes give an urgency to the need to understand the superstitious beliefs of the youth. Unless we


capture the superstitious beliefs now we may not be able to capture them at any time in future, since many superstitious beliefs may either drop out or undergo revision and modification in the light of the fast tempo of socio-political and cultural change. It is in this perspective that the study of the belief systems of the school going population assumes far greater importance. It could serve the purpose of the permanent preservation of the traditional ways of believing.

Family and Superstitious Beliefs

Psychologists and psychiatrists have long maintained that our relationship with people are patterned by our early relationships in the home during the period of infancy and childhood. Louis Kaplan explains this as follows: "The house has been described as the psychological laboratory within which human nature is formed - the source of our most intimate and most lasting impressions. This power of home cannot be disputed since the home has the child before any other social agencies can get to him". Without question, the child's habits of thinking, feeling and acting emerge out during the first five or six years of life. Boring and others assert that "It is in the family that the child acquires mores - the customs buttressed with moral sanctions as codes of decency;"
he acquires his taboos. It functions in transmitting the cultural heritage. The child acquires folkways - the routine habits of life in his cultures etc. - in and through the family".  

MacIver and Page go to a further extent in establishing the influence of family. According to them, the family is far the most important primary group in society. It continues to serve as a total community for the lives born within it, gradually relinquish this character as they grow toward adulthood. It is the earliest social environment of all the higher forms of life, and the profoundest for native influence in the awakening lives of which it is the source. In particular it moulds the character of the individual by the impression both of organic and mental habits.  

J.C. Marfatia, one of the eminent psychiatrists of India, also has emphasized the importance of family in influencing the behaviour of the entire members of it. It would be difficult to overestimate the effects of parental behaviour in children's psychological growth and behaviour. Thompson says that "House influences probably outweigh the effects of all other environmental impacts combined in determining the fundamental organization of children's behaviour .... The foundation of children's social


attitudes and skills are laid in the home .... The house is truly the greatest socialising agency in all contemporary cultures".¹

It is interesting to examine Jahoda's concerted view on this end. "Naturally one has to guard against drawing excessively sweeping conclusions from some studies, but it does look as though tyrannical and arbitrary home background is likely to produce a predisposition towards the acceptance of superstition".² Very few studies have been undertaken in Kerala to find out the impact of family background on superstitious beliefs.

To what extent are the younger generation superstitious? Do the superstitious beliefs prevalent in Kerala differ from those found in other parts of India and outside? What types of beliefs prevalent here are shared by other cultures and nations? Do superstitious beliefs differ in the degree of their popularity? What causes superstitious beliefs and how do they change with times? What are the psycho-dynamic factors and socio-cultural determinants of superstitious beliefs? How do social class-membership, religion and family background influence the formation of superstitious beliefs? These are provocative questions that merit scientific study and analysis.

Specific purposes of the study

1. To find out the nature and extent of superstitious beliefs

prevalent among the high school pupils in Kerala.

2. To find out whether the superstitious beliefs prevalent here are shared by other cultures and nations.

3. To find out whether there is any difference in the degree of popularity of the superstitious beliefs in the three major areas of Kerala.

4. To find out the nature and degree of relationship between superstitious beliefs and family variable such as parental income, education and professional status.

5. To find out the nature and degree of relationship between caste, community, religion and superstitious beliefs of high school pupils.

6. To find out the nature of relationship between religious practices in the family and superstitious beliefs of high school pupils.

7. To find out sex differences and rural-urban differences with regard to superstitious beliefs.

8. To find out how do pupils perceive the causal factors behind superstitious beliefs.

Sample and Technique

Following the method of survey research a two level sample was selected. Since it is intended to survey the superstitious beliefs of high school pupils all over Kerala, the first level sample was so selected as to represent all the areas of Kerala. Kerala is mainly divided into three major regions - Southern, Central and Northern (Trivandrum, Ernakulam and Calicut). Forty-four schools were selected on a stratified
random basis covering all the three major regions in Kerala. One standard each from each of the high school standards i.e., VIII, IX & X, was selected at random from each selected school and the investigator thus identified 5544 high school pupils from the whole of Kerala. The investigator went to each class in each school and after distributing pieces of papers, children were asked to write as many superstitious beliefs as possible within a period of 45 minutes. Children were given the necessary directions regarding how to write the superstitious beliefs that they have heard. More than six hundred and ten (610) varieties of superstitious beliefs were thus collected. Some were more popular and other less popular. The percentage frequency of each superstition based on the number of pupils who have written each type of belief was calculated separately for each of the three educational regions (that constitute the state of Kerala) and then for the total sample (the whole of Kerala). Since it was found that the popularity ranks obtained by different superstitions with reference to the three regions did not differ significantly, the percentage frequency for the total all Kerala sample was mainly consulted for preparing the superstition inventory for the second level study. According to the frequency of the superstitions heard, 120 superstitions representing various categories of beliefs were selected to constitute the superstition inventory. A sample of 360 high school pupils was selected from nine schools which were chosen on a stratified random basis from Trivandrum revenue district
for conducting the pilot study. After finding the discriminating index of each item, 60 beliefs were finally selected to form the final inventory. In addition to this 60 beliefs, general information data relating to family background, socio-economic background, age, etc., were also included in it. The inventory also consisted of a short scale to measure the religiosity of parents and a short check-list consisting of six probable causal factors behind the superstitious beliefs. The final inventory was administered personally by the investigator to a sample of 1600 high school pupils selected from 13 schools, selected on a stratified random basis from Trivandrum revenue district giving due weight to factors such as location, composition and management.

The data were analysed systematically, employing statistical techniques such as contingency, coefficient, product-moment correlation coefficient and mean statistics. The percentage frequency of superstitions heard as well as strongly believed was calculated for all the 60 types of superstitious beliefs mentioned in the final inventory.

Limitations

Even though for collecting superstition the whole of Kerala was taken into account, for conducting the final correlation study the investigator had to satisfy himself with the high school pupils of Trivandrum revenue district only.
Since Trivandrum sample being representative of the whole of Kerala, this was followed in order to avoid the excessive labour in administering, scoring and statistical manipulation of the data obtained from a larger sample.

Superstition is a highly personal and a delicate subject and so a questionnaire-technique may have its own limitations when used as a tool for studying the superstitious beliefs. There is a general tendency among people to appear more rational than they actually are. In order to overcome this limitation to the extent possible, the investigator took adequate care to avoid the word 'superstition' from the inventory. Moreover, while giving the general direction in connection with the administration of the inventory, the pupils were made to understand that there is nothing abnormal in having various beliefs and that everybody does believe in one type of superstition or another. The children were made to realise that their belief and non-belief in superstition has nothing to do with their character, moral values and social status.

The investigator could not establish the validity of the tool (superstition inventory) through interviews or direct observation of the pupils' behaviour. In fact an attempt was made to indirectly validate the inventory by giving the same inventory to a sample of 100 parents of a particular school. The product-moment co-efficient correlation was calculated
between the superstition score of parents and pupils. All the items of the inventory have face validity and controversial items were discarded.

Regarding the reliability of the tool, the investigator could not make any comprehensive attempt. But he selected a sample of 100 pupils in a representative school and the inventory was administered a second time to the pupils after a lapse of two months. The test-retest reliability was calculated. Usually in personality inventories response option is taken into account and 50% of the statements will be positive and 50% negative. But in the present inventory, it is found that it is not advisable to take this response option into account. It was also found that negative and positive statements might be measuring different dimensions and not the same dimension of superstition. Moreover as asserted by Gage with reference to the measurement of authoritarianism through Fascism scale, negative and positive statements may have different implications. He believes that the agreement with a statement will denote a degree of authoritarian tendency. The same logic may be applicable to superstitious beliefs also.

The part of the inventory which was employed for measuring religiosity may be subject to criticisms. But it

can be asserted that the religiosity score was mainly employed as a classifying category and not for sophisticated statistical calculations.

**Definition of terms**

For the purpose of the present investigation, superstitious beliefs are given the following definition: Superstitious beliefs are those which (a) have been demonstrated to be at variance with objective facts, (b) are likely to be shared among many members of a society, (c) frequently involve a disposition to ascribe phenomena that admit of a natural explanation to such occult or supernatural causes as 'fate', 'luck' or the 'devil', thus misplacing the source of causation.

The phrase family background involves religion, caste, community, parental education, profession and income, and the nature of religious practices in the family.