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Hatekar's Suspension

I have been an active member of the academic community of Mumbai University for 40 years from 1953 to 1992; first as a student of the department of economics and later as a professor and director of the department. I strongly deplore the university's act of suspending Neeraj Hatekar.

During the last 20 years of my retirement, I have visited the department occasionally for some functions and also had some discussions with Hatekar on his research. I have been impressed by his qualities as an academician. Hatekar is very well rated: a good teacher and research guide, and an active and versatile researcher himself.

The university has evidently no regard for such a professor in its community.

The cause of suspension seems to be Hatekar raising points and issues of relevance to the functioning of the university, which have also received wide publicity. His intention was to highlight weaknesses in the functioning of the university with a view to push the authorities towards corrective action. Tarnishing the image of the university was surely not his intention. His correspondence on the matters he has raised remained un-responded to by the university authorities and the vice chancellor never even thought of meeting Hatekar and asking him to explain his position. Instead, this suspension has followed.

It is time the chancellor of the university steps in, advises the vice chancellor to withdraw this suspension, and asks him to open a dialogue with Hatekar and his colleagues, with a view to initiate corrective action where called for.

J C Sandesara

MUMBAI

Science and Superstition – I

This is in response to the article "The Rationalist Movement against Quack Healing: Critical Questions" by Shubha Ranganathan (EPW, 4 January 2014).

The author deserves applause for drawing our attention to the various tribal and traditional medical and psycho-medical practices, including rituals and magic,

what many call superstitious, and the recent engagement of the rationalists against such practices.

At many points the line separating "superstition", "religion" and "rational science" is blurred. Will it always be correct to say that our modern physician writes her/his prescription perfectly as per medical science? Perhaps not. First, there is not everything explained clearly in medical books. Second, physicians are also a product of the cultural background, where they have been encultured and the academic trainings received in medical schools. Every physician, in fact, carries his or her own brand of superstition in one form or the other, as acquired primarily from the early enculturation processes.

The epistemological meaning and uses of the term "superstition" remains racist in nature. Christianity once referred all other religions as "pagan" and "superstitious". To scientific rationality all religions are superstitions. But, it is unfortunate that we call our supernatural beliefs "religion", while all other practices, particularly those of the marginalised folk and tribal people, are termed "superstition".

The significance of traditional faith-healing, irrespective of their "scientific" values, has been explored in numerous studies. Traditional faith-healings are significant not for their primary medical efficacies but for their healing and confidence-building measures. In our fight with the so-called superstitious herbalists and quacks vis-à-vis the tribal and folk medical and psycho-medical practices, we have to strengthen our rational system of medicines so that people can find them efficient and easily accessible to address their problems instead of banning what is often the only and always the more easily accessible option at their disposal. In our fight for a rational world we should inculcate rational thinking and practises ourselves, setting clear instances motivating others, but we should never force others to abandon their practices merely on our own belief of superstition, particularly when at some point or other we all are irrational and superstitious.

Babul Roy

Comment on Website

Science and Superstition – II

Shubha Ranganathan's article ("The Rationalist Movement against Quack Healing: Critical Questions", EPW, 4 January 2014) is very critical of the approach and methods adopted by Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti (ANS), a well-known society in Maharashtra, which has been doing their best to eradicate evil practices in the name of religion, faith, black magic, *Bhanumati*, *Aghori*, etc. The author may be opposing the rationalist philosophy as such but to reject the idea of a sceptical approach and also to object to scientific temper in analysing these problems shows total contempt for the good work that this organisation has been doing for more than two decades.

Narendra Dabholkar had to pay with his life for pursuing this with missionary zeal. This has led to, unfortunately after his murder, the passage of the Anti-Superstition Bill in Maharashtra State Assembly during the just concluded winter session. While reading the article, it appears that the author has relied more on the research work of Johannes Quack. His research is on the rationalist movements in India with a focus on the ANS in Maharashtra.

There have been several movements in India, right from the ancient period when Brihaspati, Charvaka, the Lokayatas and, to a certain extent, the Buddhists were prevalent and had a wide-ranging critique which had great impact on Eastern philosophy. Rationalists were and always remain a small segment in our society but their contribution to thought and progress of society cannot be ignored.

The author takes clandestine cover of culture as many practices in a society cannot be separated from rituals which are deep-rooted in religion. The two individual case studies cited as examples of relief given to the beneficiaries could be rebutted by many other examples where the visitors to such temples and faith-healing centres have become victims of the priests. These two examples are most unconvincing.

I wish the author had openly stated that she opposes the rationalists and the challenge they pose to the system which still thrives on the thought process of the dark ages. There are vested interests and

political parties to see such a system still continues, as it helps them remain in power and exploit the gullible in the name of "culture" and protecting religion. There is no blend between scientific temper and religion possible and rationalists know this through their struggle with the latter. It is the religious heads and institutions who try to convince their followers that the two are similar and not poles apart.

Lastly, the bill which has been passed by the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly and Council is a model bill for the entire country and its importance is underlined by the fact that other states like Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, among others, are considering its enactment in their states too. All that we need is a central act to cover the entire country.

Under no circumstances will a rationalist abandon the scientific approach whose core is the idea of critique and scepticism, keeping everything open for correction and improvement. A study of world history will show the damage done by religions and their faithful followers, rather than by any rationalist who has taken on the ideas of the dark ages of ignorance followed by exploitation.

A V Gopalakrishnan

Comment on Website

Morbidities of Alcohol

The article by Dakshita Das ("Gender Issues for the Fourteenth Finance Commission", EPW, 21 December 2013) draws attention to some of the devastating social consequences of the use of the tax on liquor as a means to generate large revenues for the State. Thus, in Tamil Nadu, the widespread availability of liquor through the vast network of TASMACH shops (Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation) generates huge revenues through both excise duties and sales taxes. The author mentions some of the negative

consequences of such liquor sales on women and families, such as violence, tension and marital quarrels, and shortage of money in the family leading to violence and extraction of money, and others. Clearly, liquor is a major threat to the quality of women's lives.

But this is not all – a deeper look will point to damaging consequences also to men, and to the economic and social fabric as a whole. For example, a study of the levels of male morbidity and mortality in Tamil Nadu in the last 20 years, and it should not be difficult for the Finance Commission to obtain these figures, is likely to show high levels of both. The social consequences during the years of morbidity would include irregular and/or loss of employment leading to lower earnings by males in the family on the one hand, and high costs of hospitalisation, medical expenses and care during periods of illness, sometimes as much as 10 years, on the other. After the death of the male, the family becomes woman-headed, but one with a heavy debt burden as a result of the expenditures of nursing and of funeral costs. With limited earning capacity (as women's work almost always brings in less than that of men) and other social costs such as risk of community ostracism and sexual harassment by men seeking "unprotected" women, the social costs linger much longer.

It is encouraging to know that appropriate fiscal measures by the Finance Commission, within the framework of "gender budgeting", can ameliorate this situation to some extent, by reducing the State's dependence on liquor taxation for revenue. Perhaps the author, as both a woman and a bureaucrat, can make this suggestion to the Fourteenth Finance Commission on behalf of the many women who cannot.

Mina Swaminathan

CHENNAI

Web Exclusives

The following articles have been uploaded in the past week in the Web Exclusives section of the EPW website. They have not been published in the print edition.

- (1) Folding the Tent: Kerala Circus Academy – *Nisha P R*
- (2) A Tragedy Unfolding: Tribal Children Dying in Attapady – *Manikandan A D*
- (3) Ruhr Mining Museum: An Institution of the Post-industrial Society – *Dhiraj Kumar Nite*

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