

# **Anthropological Perspective on the Persistence of Superstition among Educated Populations in Pune**

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**Abstract:** *Superstition, a belief or practice that is not based on scientific reasoning or evidence, has persisted throughout human history. Despite the advances in science, technology, and education, superstition continues to influence societies across the world, often in ways that shape culture, traditions, and behaviours. This study aims to address this gap by investigating the persistence of superstitions in Pune's educated population (22–65 years) and to explore the role of superstition in 21st century among Pune's educated population. In light of the findings, it becomes clear that superstition among the educated is not simply a leftover from the past. It is a living, evolving system of thought and practice that reflects the emotional needs, cultural values, and psychological landscapes of individuals. Thus, superstitions are not disappearing but adapting to the changing values of society, becoming more personalized, appealing, and technologically integrated.*

**Keywords:** Superstitions, Educated population, Cultural adaptations, Evolving traditions, Modern rationality.

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Superstitions is defined as a belief or way of behaving that is based on fear of the unknown and faith in magic or luck : a belief that certain events or things will bring good or bad luck.(*Britannica Dictionary*.) [7]

Superstition, a belief or practice that is not based on scientific reasoning or evidence, has persisted throughout human history. Despite the advances in science, technology, and education, superstition continues to influence societies across the world, often in ways that shape culture, traditions, and behaviours.[8]

India's literacy rate has risen from 74 per cent in 2011 to 80.9 per cent in 2023-24 (*The Economic Times*, 2025.)([4]. In a world increasingly driven by scientific advancements, it is paradoxical that the lines between science, faith and superstition often blur. This phenomenon is universal. But in India, the conflation of these domains has increased alarmingly, with pseudoscience often masquerading as scientific truth. The consequences are far-reaching, affecting public policy, education and even judicial pronouncements. (The New Indian Express, April 2025) [5]

The urban upper caste and class educated despite being capable distancing from and dismissing superstitions, intentionally or consciously act as religious, ritualistic and superstitious lot. [1]

Pune, a major urban hub with average literacy rate of Pune city 89.56 percent, paradoxically exhibits persistent superstitions among its educated workforce. This contradiction highlights a critical gap in understanding why educated individuals in technologically advanced cities like Pune retain irrational beliefs and how these practices intersect with modernity, identity, and socio-cultural dynamics. Existing research focuses on rural or semi-urban populations, leaving urban, educated demographics understudied. This study aims to address this gap by investigating the persistence of superstitions in Pune's educated population (22–65 years) and to explore the role of superstition in 21st century, understand why it continues despite scientific progress and how it shapes beliefs among Pune's educated population.

## **II. METHODOLOGY**

The population under study comprised of educated individuals aged 22–65 years with at least an undergraduate degree residing in Pune for a minimum of five years to ensure familiarity with local cultural practices. Participants were



selected from various professional sectors, including Corporate, Education, Healthcare, and Government, to ensure a diverse representation of beliefs and practices related to superstitions. The participants were selected using Convenience and Snowball sampling followed by in-depth interviews of the participants.

### **III. FINDINGS**

#### ***Enduring Cultural Beliefs and Family Influence***

A predominant theme emerging from the data is the deep-rooted influence of familial and cultural traditions in shaping superstitious behaviour. Participants consistently shared that their initial exposure to superstitions stemmed not from fear or formal instruction but from everyday interactions within the family, particularly with elders. These beliefs were absorbed as part of the domestic environment and childhood routines. For example, practices such as avoiding nail-cutting on Saturdays or refraining from sweeping after sunset were internalized not because of their logic, but because they were normalized by family members. Such acts were rarely questioned during childhood, establishing a foundation for their persistence into adult life.

*"My grandmother used to say not to sweep the floor after sunset. As a child, I didn't understand why, but now even as an adult, I somehow hesitate. It's not that I think something bad will happen... it's just ingrained."* (Participant E; Female,28)

While participants expressed scepticisms toward the literal belief systems behind these superstitions, many admitted to continuing these practices out of habit or emotional attachment. The ritualistic nature of these customs, coupled with their association with parents and grandparents, contributed to a lingering respect for them. One participant reflected that even as an adult, they still hesitate before sweeping in the evening, not from belief in ill consequences, but due to the strong conditioning of childhood memories. This highlights a nuanced relationship where rational disbelief coexists with emotional adherence, and where customs are performed more as inherited routines than personal convictions.

*"It's mostly habit, like I said. These things were instilled in me when I was young, and I just continued doing them. I don't think they hold any power over my life anymore, but they bring a sense of familiarity and comfort."* (Participant P; Male,36)

*"Not really. I've always seen them more as traditions than anything else. I guess the only positive association would be with the rituals my mom would do during festivals. It felt comforting, but not because of any belief in the superstition itself, more because it was a family bonding thing. But I don't know if that counts as Superstitions."* (Participant G; Male,32)

Moreover, the symbolic value of these superstitions often transcends their original intent. Participants emphasized the comfort and cultural continuity these practices offer, even when their superstitious nature is rejected. Some described them as bonding experiences during festivals or as quiet reminders of loved ones no longer present. These sentiments underscore the emotional legacy of superstition: they serve as cultural and intergenerational anchors that provide a sense of belonging and rootedness.

*"It's mostly the emotional or cultural side of things. People want to hold on to traditions because it's what connects them to their roots. It's hard to completely let go of something that's been ingrained in you since childhood. For me, it brings back memories of my mother and childhood. Sometimes it's very difficult to let go of things."* (Participant J; Male,40)

#### ***Conflict Between Rationality and Tradition***

Another key theme that emerged from the interviews is the internal tension many participants face between scientific rationality and inherited traditions. Particularly among those with academic or professional affiliations in science and technology, this conflict surfaced repeatedly. While participants were equipped with a rational, evidence-based worldview, they often found themselves engaging in superstitious practices passed down through generations. This was especially true in emotionally charged situations such as job interviews, travel, or health concerns, where logic gave way. Rather than denoting belief, these actions served as coping mechanisms, revealing the emotional resilience of cultural traditions in the face of modernity.



*"There's always a bit of a conflict, but I think they can coexist. My scientific education has made me question many superstitions, but the cultural aspect of it is hard to completely ignore. I try to think rationally, but there are moments when the emotional and cultural side takes over, and I end up following some superstitions."* (Participant F; Female,39)

Participants spoke about their struggle to reconcile the dual identities they often inhabit. For instance, one participant described feeling *"like two people logical at work, emotional at home,"* (Participant E; Female,28) emphasizing how context influences behaviour.

This theme underscores that superstition, for many educated individuals, does not exist in direct opposition to rationality but in a parallel emotional domain. The tension they experience is not always perceived as a contradiction but rather as an ongoing negotiation between inherited identity and intellectual autonomy. The emotional value embedded in these practices, even when not consciously believed, offers insight into how tradition persists despite or even alongside scientific reasoning. This nuanced coexistence illustrates that the human experience is not solely governed by logic, but also by the emotional and cultural textures of lived life.

*"Yes, it's confusing sometimes. I'm fully aware of the science behind things, but when it comes to certain rituals or beliefs, I can't help but feel that they have some kind of emotional or cultural significance. I guess it's hard to completely separate the two."* (Participant S; Male,42)

### ***Superstition as a Coping Mechanism***

A significant theme that emerged from the interviews was the role of superstition as a coping mechanism, particularly in times of stress and uncertainty. Participants commonly described engaging in superstitious rituals whether it was visiting a temple before an important exam or tying a protective thread not because they believed in the supernatural effects of these practices, but because they provided psychological comfort. These rituals offered a sense of peace and emotional reassurance, helping individuals manage anxiety when faced with situations outside their control.

One participant reflected, *"Not directly. But subconsciously? Maybe. Like, if I have to give a presentation, I don't wear black."* (Participant B; Male,28)

This response captures the essence of superstition as a psychological tool rather than a supernatural belief. Further, many participants noted that superstitions served as a way to regain control over situations where they felt powerless.

As one respondent shared, *"When things are out of control, people turn to superstitions because it gives them a sense of control, like they're doing something to influence the outcome."* (Participant D; Male,34)

Participants often admitted that during stressful transitions such as a job change, relationship challenges, or major life events they found solace in performing certain rituals. These actions were not believed to have tangible, supernatural consequences but instead acted as psychological anchors that made individuals feel more secure in the face of uncertainty.

The significance of superstition as a coping mechanism was particularly emphasized in urban environments, where the pace of life is fast and the pressures of daily living are high. Participants indicated that, in a society marked by constant change and unpredictability, superstition can offer a form of emotional support and continuity. This phenomenon highlights how superstitions fulfil an emotional function that is separate from their logical or scientific validity. Thus, superstitions play an important role in providing individuals with a sense of stability and emotional grounding amidst the pressures and unpredictability of modern life.

### ***The Role of Media and Digital Platforms***

The role of media was identified as a pivotal factor in shaping contemporary beliefs about superstition, with participants highlighting contrasting impacts based on generational differences. Older participants frequently pointed out how television serials and films played a significant role in perpetuating superstitions, particularly through the portrayal of astrology, curses, and supernatural forces.

One respondent noted, *"I think the media plays a big role in portraying superstitions, especially in movies and TV shows. They often exaggerate superstitions for dramatic effect. For example, horror films always use the concept of evil spirits or curses, which often ties into superstitions. The media sometimes presents these ideas as normal, which can perpetuate these beliefs."* (Participant E; Female,28)



This connection between media portrayals and belief systems illustrates how traditional media can reinforce and normalize superstitious thinking, especially when the narratives are dramatized or sensationalized for entertainment. As participants reflected on films and shows that depict these themes, they acknowledged the lingering effect such media could have on public perceptions, sometimes leading individuals to consider superstitions more seriously than they might in other contexts.

In contrast, younger respondents, expressed a more nuanced understanding of the role digital platforms play in the propagation of superstitions. While they acknowledged that social media platforms like WhatsApp and YouTube could be conduits for the spread of pseudoscientific ideas such as viral superstitions, horoscopes, and myth-based forwards they also recognized the opportunity for counter-narratives within these spaces.

One participant shared, *"WhatsApp is full of weird superstitions—like if you don't forward a message, bad luck will follow. I ignore those. But I follow a few influencers on Instagram who talk about manifestation and angel numbers. It's kind of spiritual but modern, you know?"* (Participant A; Female,42)

The generational contrast reveals how superstition is adapted for different audiences, particularly through social media. Older generations may encounter superstitions that reinforce traditional beliefs, while younger generation's familiarity with digital tools allows them to engage with superstitions critically, both encountering and challenging the very myths they are exposed to. This dual aspect of digital platforms reflects a shift in how superstition is consumed and understood.

### ***Generational Shifts in the Perception of Superstition***

One of the most compelling insights drawn from the interviews is the presence of distinct generational differences in how superstition is perceived and practiced. One participant clearly stated a divide between older and younger family members, noting that the older generation, particularly parents, remain deeply embedded in traditional customs.

*"Yes, there's a clear divide. My parents' generation was very rooted in tradition and believed in certain customs. They still do. But I think my generation, especially those of us who've grown up with more exposure to science and modern thinking, are more sceptical. My younger siblings are much more open about questioning superstitions and do not follow many of the things that our parents did."* (Participant P; Male,36)

These practices are upheld not merely out of fear or devotion but as expressions of cultural continuity. Their beliefs are often seen as integral to identity, family harmony, and inherited values. Superstitions in this context are not questioned but accepted as a natural part of everyday life, reflecting the enduring role of tradition in shaping behaviour.

In contrast, another participant described a noticeable shift within their own generation, one marked by increased exposure to science, modern education, and rationalist thinking. The younger generation tends to approach superstitions with a more sceptical lens, often questioning their relevance or logical foundation. However, this scepticism does not always translate into complete rejection. This phase of partial disengagement reflects a state of transition where traditional beliefs coexist with rationality, often resulting in internal conflict or selective adherence.

*"Absolutely. I follow some, my mom follows more, and my grandma follows almost everything blindly. I think each generation is shedding some layers of it."* (Participant M; Female,28)

According to one of the participants, *"Absolutely. My kids don't believe in any of this. They challenge everything. Once when my daughter broke a mirror, she Googled it and laughed about the "seven years" idea. I think that kind of questioning is healthy."* (Participant G; Male,32)

The younger generation in families seems to be the least connected to superstitious practices. Because they have grown up with more exposure to digital media, critical thinking, and diverse friend circles, they are more likely to question, ignore, or completely rethink traditional beliefs. They tend to be more open to conversations and more comfortable breaking away from old rules. This shift suggests not the disappearance of superstition altogether, but its transformation across generations from unquestioned tradition to optional practice, and in some cases, to active resistance. These findings underscore the importance of viewing superstition not as static but as a dynamic cultural form that evolves with changing generational values and knowledge systems.





### ***Transformation, Not Decline: New-Age Spirituality***

A significant theme that emerged was the transformation of superstition, rather than its decline. Many participants, especially younger ones, emphasized that while traditional superstitions might be fading in popularity, newer forms of belief often framed as "spiritual" practices are taking their place. Practices such as numerology apps, manifestation journals, and the following of angel numbers have become increasingly popular, particularly among more educated individuals. These modern-day practices often maintain the same psychological functions as older superstitions: providing a sense of control, hope, or affirmation in times of uncertainty.

One participant noted, *"I think it's transforming. People are more educated and critical now, but there's still a strong attachment to certain practices. Superstition is being reshaped to fit modern life it's not as rigid as before, but it's still present. Superstitions are more about emotional comfort and cultural connection than actual belief."* (Participant T; Male, 32)

The shift from traditional superstitions to new-age spiritual practices signals a broader cultural transformation where the need for belief remains constant, but the forms it takes have evolved. In this new context, superstition merges with concepts of wellness and self-care, becoming individualized rather than rooted in age-old traditions. Participants noted that modern forms of superstition were often less about rigid adherence to old beliefs and more about finding emotional comfort or a connection to something beyond oneself. Ultimately, this transformation points to a broader cultural evolution where superstition is not vanishing but rather evolving to fit contemporary life.

## **IV. DISCUSSIONS**

This study set out to explore the persistence of superstition among the educated population in Pune. In a world increasingly shaped by science, logic, and digital information, one might assume that irrational beliefs would gradually fade into obscurity. However, the research revealed a far more complex and nuanced picture. Superstitious beliefs and behaviours, far from disappearing, have shown remarkable resilience, often adapting to fit the evolving contours of modern life.

It emerged that superstition in the 21st century is not necessarily about blind faith in the supernatural, but more often about continuity, comfort, and the quiet rituals that give meaning to everyday experiences. A recurring observation was the strong influence of family and cultural memory in shaping superstitious practices. Many participants recalled how childhood rituals and taboos were passed down by parents or grandparents, which strongly influenced their beliefs an idea also highlighted in the work of (Sethi and Saini, 2025) [6]. Most participants spoke about childhood exposure to rituals and taboos passed down by grandparents or parents. These early lessons, though rarely interrogated in youth, often became embedded as daily habits. For instance, acts like not cutting nails on Saturdays or avoiding certain omens before starting something new were performed routinely not necessarily with conviction, but as expressions of respect for tradition. This generational transmission shows that beliefs are not always retained due to active agreement, but often due to emotional or cultural attachments.

One of the most striking themes to emerge was the internal conflict experienced by educated individuals, particularly those from scientific or rationalist disciplines. Many participants admitted that superstitious practices do not make logical sense, yet they still turn to them during moments of stress or uncertainty. For example, a software engineer might rely on statistical models and coding logic in their work, yet still wear a "lucky" ring to important meetings. This behaviour aligns with the findings of Futrell, 2011 [2] showing that people often rely on such beliefs for emotional comfort rather than rational reasons. Thus, this highlights an important reality that education alone does not necessarily erase traditional beliefs. Rather, people often compartmentalize their rational and emotional selves.

Another dimension explored in this study was the impact of media and technology on the endurance of superstitious belief. Traditional media such as television and cinema were often seen as vehicles that reinforced stereotypes related to astrology, fate, and mystical causality. Serials and films continue to dramatize the power of rituals, omens, and curses, especially in family and religious contexts. This contributes to the normalization of superstitions, especially among older generations which supports the finds of Vinay (2017) [9] and Gaikwad (2025) [3]

However, digital platforms have complicated this dynamic. Young participants pointed out the dual nature of social media. While platforms like WhatsApp serve as breeding grounds for forwarded messages laden with pseudoscientific



claims, they also host content from science educators and rationalist influencers who use humour, evidence, and storytelling to question outdated beliefs. This indicates that the beliefs one holds are shaped as much by the algorithms of social media as by upbringing or education. Today, many practices are reframed as ‘spirituality’ or ‘energy work’ instead of superstition. Thus, superstitions are not disappearing but adapting to the changing values of society, becoming more personalized, aesthetically appealing, and technologically integrated.

In light of these findings, it becomes clear that superstition among the educated is not simply a leftover from the past. It is a living, evolving system of thought and practice that reflects the emotional needs, cultural values, and psychological landscapes of individuals. The persistence of these beliefs cannot be explained away as ignorance. Rather, they must be understood as expressions of identity, continuity, and emotional survival. Ultimately, superstition continues to operate as a fluid and multifaceted construct in educated urban settings, shaped by a blend of cultural memory, emotional resilience, and evolving social discourse.

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