

THE UNDERAGE OPTIMIST

How pseudoscience is coming in the way of India tackling the pandemic

CHETAN BHAGAT

I write this column after having kept the Navratri fast for seven days, something I have been doing twice a year since the last thirty years. I am proud of my religion and have love for it. However, sometimes love means pointing out things that need to be changed. The pandemic and our response to it have raised questions about something that plagues our community— a large number of unscientific Hindus. The unscientific Hindu, in fact, has been the bane of our land for the past millennium. It is the reason why the Indian subcontinent has been ruled by outsiders for centuries. It is the reason why we are seeing record deaths from corona even as China and the US seem to have put the pandemic behind them and are moving towards economic growth again.

Before someone twists these words, let me clarify that this doesn't mean that a) all Hindus are unscientific or b) people from other religions are not unscientific or c) Hindu religion per se is more unscientific. No, it doesn't mean any of this. There are plenty of unscientific Muslims and Christians too. And all religions are full of unscientific beliefs. However, when it comes to India, the dominant religion is Hinduism. Hence, our country's fate is directly tied and most affected by the beliefs of the Hindu population. Also, as a Hindu myself, I think it is better to self-reflect about my own community first.

There are, of course, scientific Hindus —and we have many Nobel Prize winners to prove it. Unfortunately, there are also too many unscientific Hindus who dominate the country's politics and public opinion today. Worse, some of them mix some fake science in their unscientific beliefs.

These anti-science or pseudo-scientific attitudes, combined with ultra-fragile egos, have cost us dear. But what is a scientific mindset, one might ask. Some may even quote the innate greatness of Hindu texts that incorporate science within them. Others will say India had so much science that we invented the decimal system. Or that our mythological texts talk about flying machines and advanced weapons.

Unfortunately, over-glorifying our history and mythologies, and mixing some scientific terms in it don't make us scientific at all. In fact, it is the opposite. A scientific mind is an admission that we do not know everything. That there are new discoveries possible based on new observations which, in turn, will lead us to continuously changing our beliefs.

For example, when Covid first came, we didn't understand the virus well. Then through observation, measurement, testing and discovery, we understood the virus better. We used that understanding to create vaccines which, for now, seems to be the only way to get out of the corona crisis. Over time, something new might be known and we may have a solution other than the vaccine. A scientific mind just keeps looking for new answers.

In contrast, an unscientific mind believes that all the knowledge that we need has been discovered in our great past. That if we were to only adhere to our scriptures, follow our glorious history, not question what our great forefathers believed and keep our faith we would achieve great progress.

Whether it is our diets, economy, medicines, education, how to live your life or governance, many unscientific Hindus believe our past has all the answers. The Vedas contain everything, people say. Or that thousands of years ago, we were the most advanced place on earth.

Even if one were to believe that claim, one begs to ask —what happened then? How did we lose our way? Being scientific means finding new answers today and changing with the times, not clinging to the science of the past. It is an extreme irony that while we want our children to study science in school, we don't want to apply scientific thought in our process. We want to live in the glory of the past, even as other nations whizz past us.

Millions of people went to take a dip in the Kumbh Mela, even when the second wave was well established. The world laughed at us, as images of record cases and choked hospitals contrasted with lakhs of people at the river banks. We were quick to blame the Tablighi conference, but when are we going to gaze inwards? Cases have been steadily rising since February, but it is only in late April that there is seriousness about a vaccination plan for everyone.

I respect my religion and revere the scriptures. However, it is only a vaccine developed in scientific labs that can save humanity today. This doesn't make science superior to religion. However, it does tell you that faith and science

both have their place. Those who yearn for, and live in an imagined past stay stagnant while progress comes to those who live in the future.

Love your religion. Follow and respect traditions. However, be scientific — curious about new discoveries and willing to change your mind because of it. That, and only that, is what will make us create a golden era for India again.

