

Superstitions & Misbeliefs: A Remedy for Hysteria in the Absence of a Cure

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ABSTRACT

There have been various huge pandemics recorded in mankind's set of experiences where pandemic related emergencies have caused colossal negative effects on public well-being, economies, and even national security all around the world. But, along with such effects, the threat of a global outbreak of an infectious disease influences the psychological behaviour and health responses. Superstitions & misbeliefs act tools for coping up with such uncertain times. People resort to all kinds of folk remedies and superstitious solutions to find a cure to a disease in pursuit of protecting their loved ones. In such terrible times, different mass media plays variety of roles and can have both positive and negative effect on the society. The purpose of this study is to investigate the connection between superstitious believes, misinformation and global outbreak of infectious diseases, providing a summary of key features with consequent discussion on topics like psychology behind superstitions, link between superstitions and global outbreaks of infectious diseases using the cases of Tuberculosis pandemic and the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Superstitions & misbeliefs; Disease outbreak; Ffolk remedies; Psychological behaviour; Mass media..

1.0 Introduction

Uncertainty is surrounding us, never more so than today. The current COVID-19 pandemic has uplifted vulnerability over the economy, business, funds, connections, and obviously, physical and emotional wellness. However, as individuals, we need security. We need to have a sense of security and have a feeling of authority over our lives and prosperity. Dread and vulnerability can leave you feeling stressed, restless, and frail over an incredible course. It can deplete you emotionally and trap you in a spiral of unending "what-ifs" and most pessimistic scenarios about what tomorrow may bring.

In the past, in the absence of scientific explanation, superstitious beliefs and unfounded assumptions about what causes deadliest plagues and contagious diseases led to horrific outcomes. We can view such beliefs as a part of "copying mechanism", as the environment was filled with uncertainties. Tuberculosis in the late 17th century was believed to be one of the deadliest common diseases around. It was estimated to have caused more deaths than any other pathogen in world history. The lack of medicine and knowledge about germ-theory and contagion in the middle ages led to absolutely no cure and treatment. When there was no faith in medicine and science left, people resorted to a number of misbeliefs. By the 1800s, New England region in the United States, one of the most famous myth emerged - "The Vampire or Undead." Tuberculosis left victims to look lifeless, as if the life-force was sucked out of them. The townspeople could not just stay back and watch their loved ones pass away one by one, due to which soon a rumor started to spread around that the deceased family members wake up during night and claims the lives of the members who already are suffering from Tuberculosis.

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This was done to “make-sure” the dead stays dead, but this didn’t end here. The ash was then mixed with warm water or milk and fed the suffering members, but in the end, it didn’t cure them.

Superstitions still holds a prominent in human psyche. Take the current COVID-19 pandemic as an example. The virus is believed to emerge from Wuhan province in China, in December 2019. Initially the virus was under-estimated, as a number of rumors and misinformation spread across the world thanks to social media. As of now, with at least, 6,28,136 new daily cases of the virus and 9,353 deaths daily worldwide as for November 17, 2020, the gravity of the unfolded crisis is undeniable. Just like in the case of Tuberculosis in the middle ages, people resorted to “magical thinking” and superstitious behavior, [particularly](#) when there seem to be few ways to exert control over a situation. Indians believe in myths and superstitions in large numbers, irrespective of religion. Superstitions have a deep-rooting in our culture and still holds. Such thinking has been passing on from generation to generation, therefore, in times of uncertainty and vulnerability, emergence of superstitious beliefs was bound to manifest. A variety of superstitions and religious practices against the global threat of COVID-19 can be found in India, such as consumption of so called “elixirs of life” like *Gowmutra* and *Gangajal*, worshiping the virus as a “goddess”, participating in religious performances and rituals, the list goes on.

During such terrible times, mass media have various roles and responsibilities. This includes spreading awareness, tracking number of cases and deaths, influencing behaviour and reinforcing public health response. But, mass media can also have a rather negative impact in the communities, by spreading misinformation and fake news, which calls for necessary actions to be taken and formulation of new policies.

2.0 Review of literature

1. Michael E. Bell in their research paper “**Vampires and Death in New England, 1784 to 1892**” describes how during the 18th & 19th Century, the New England region of the United States was in the grips of a terrible Tuberculosis epidemic. Not willing to watch as, one after another, their family members died, some New Englanders resorted to an old folk remedy whose roots surely must rest in Europe. Called vampirism by outsiders (a term that may never have been used by those within the communities themselves) this remedy required exhuming the bodies of deceased relatives and checking them for “unnatural” signs, such as “fresh” blood in the heart. The implicit belief was that one of the relatives was not completely dead and was maintaining some semblance of a life by draining the vital force from living relatives. This showed how far the desperation for a cure can take humanity, when there are no answers from science and medicine.

2. Sarah A. Lauer in their research paper “**The Social Impact of the Misconceptions Surrounding Tuberculosis**” describes that Tuberculosis, for much of its history, was not understood. People put forth various theories addressing questions such as what caused it, how it spread, and who was most likely to get it, among others. They address many of the misconceptions surrounding tuberculosis in three different time periods: ancient times, the Middle Ages, and the 19th-20th centuries. In ancient times, the lack of understanding of tuberculosis resulted in the discrimination and isolation of the sick. In the Middle Ages, kings used tuberculosis to secure political power over their subjects. In the 19th and 20th centuries tuberculosis was both romanticized and feared, depending on the region of the Western world. Stereotypes were formed around victims of tuberculosis as society tried to make sense of a disease they did not understand.

3. Steven Taylor in their book “**The Psychology of Pandemics : Preparing for the Next Global Outbreak of Infectious Disease**” describes that that psychological factors also play an important role

in the way in which people cope with the threat of a global pandemic and its consequences, such as the loss of loved one. Although many people cope well under threat, many other people experience high level of distress or a worsening of pre-existing psychological problems, such as anxiety disorders and other clinical disorders. Psychological factors are further important for understanding and managing broader societal problems associated with pandemics such as factors involved in the spreading excessive fear. He explains why the psychological “footprint” of a pandemic is far greater than the medical “footprint.” He further explains how a increasing number of people turn towards “folk remedies” as a desperate measure to protect their loved ones.

4. Ankuran Dutta in their research paper **“Beliefs and Superstitions about COVID-19: Observations in India under Lockdown ”** describes how superstitions and misbeliefs are still active in the diverse social structure that characterizes India. Social media in particular has been swamped by hundreds of beliefs and superstitions during the COVID-19 pandemic, primarily 'infecting' digitally literate people who are unable to check the fake and unthinkingly pass on suspect messages going viral. Common people in general have been found wanting in responding to calls for greater awareness and necessary behavioural change towards adopting safe practices. Mainstream media in India has been largely playing its role in educating people about the pandemic and thereby contributing towards inculcating scientific temper, but more needs to be done. He further throws light upon common superstitions Indians have followed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

5. [Kumar Chandan Srivastava](#), [Deepti Shrivastava](#), [Kumar Gaurav Chhabra](#), [Waqar Naqvi](#), [Arti Sahu](#) in their research paper **“Facade of media and social media during COVID-19: A review”** describes how medical misinformation and unverifiable content about the COVID-19 pandemic are spreading on social media at an unprecedented pace. Mitigating the advent of rumours and misinformation during the COVID-19 epidemic is crucial, since misinformation and fake news creates panic, fear and anxiety among people, predisposing them to various mental health conditions. Instead of considering social media as a secondary medium, it should be utilized to convey important information.

6. “Coronavirus: Group hosts ‘cow urine party’, says COVID-19 due to meat eaters” (The Hindu, March 14, 2020) states that people lined up for their share of cow urine in a party organized by the president of Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha-Swami Chakrapani as him and his followers believed that cow urine can cure COVID-19. He further claimed that the virus was sent from God to punish people who ate non-vegetarian food. Union Fisheries, Dairying and Animal Husbandry Minister Giriraj Singh told reporters on March 6 the World Organisation for Animal Health as well as Indian food safety regulator FSSAI have said there was no scientific evidence to prove transmission of coronavirus from animals to humans.

7. “Coronavirus is now a Deity in many many Indian villages, Being worshiped with flowers and sweets” (News18, June 8, 2020) states that Coronavirus, which is believed to have originated in China's Wuhan and has thrown the entire world out of gear, is now a goddess in India. 'Corona Mai' is being worshiped in parts of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and Assam. Different types of rituals such as digging a pit, filled with water is offered sweets and flowers, ritual performances and *poojas* are being conducted, religious songs are being sung by groups of ladies, for the goddess “Corona Mai” to spare the lives of their loved ones and themselves.

3.0 Methodology

Qualitative methods were used to gather data regarding the research topic from people of all ages in Delhi, India. These methods included a survey with 11 close-ended questions & 1 open-ended question that assessed factors such as how aware are the people regarding present superstitions allied with COVID-19 pandemic, impact of self-isolation on their minds, desperate measures adopted by them to protect themselves and their loved one from the disease, how believing in superstitious beliefs have impacted their mental state and what form of media do they believe are responsible for spreading fake news and such superstitious beliefs. The survey recorded responses from a total of 55 respondents, each having different opinions and views.

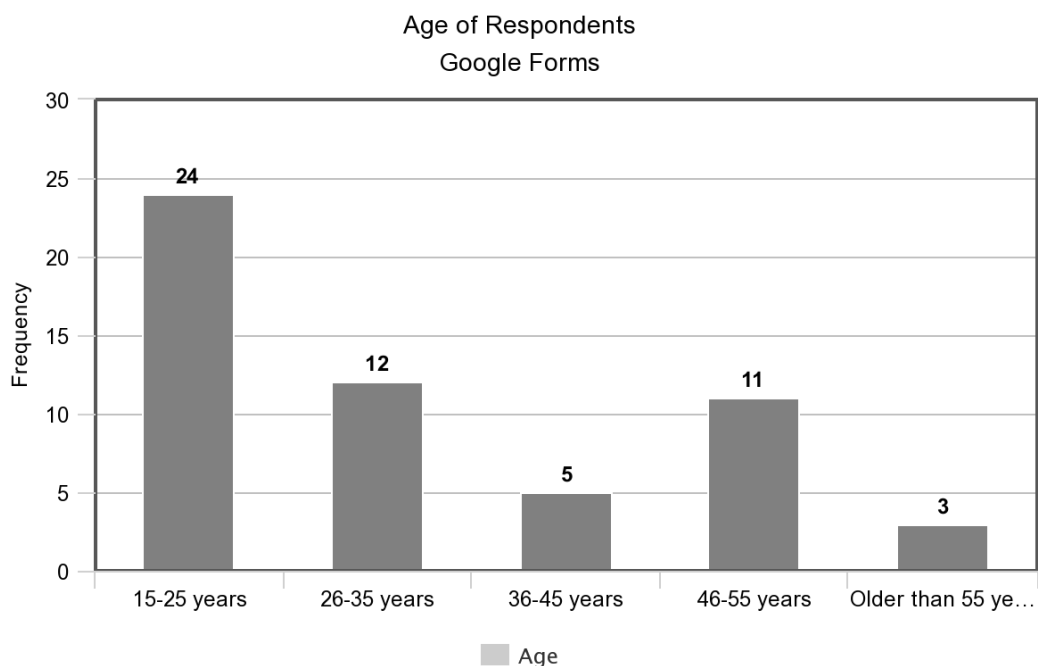
4.0 Objectives

- To study the psychological impact of superstitions & misbeliefs.
- To study why such beliefs still arise in modern culture.
- To study the role of superstitious beliefs during a disease outbreak.
- To study the impact of different mass media during a disease outbreak.
- To study the roles & responsibilities of mass media during a disease outbreak.

5.0 Data Analysis

1. Age

Table No. 1 Depicting Age of Respondents		
Age	Frequency	Percent
15-25 years	24	43.6
26-35 years	12	21.8
36-45 years	5	9
46-55 years	11	20
Older than 55 years	3	5.4
Total	55	100.0



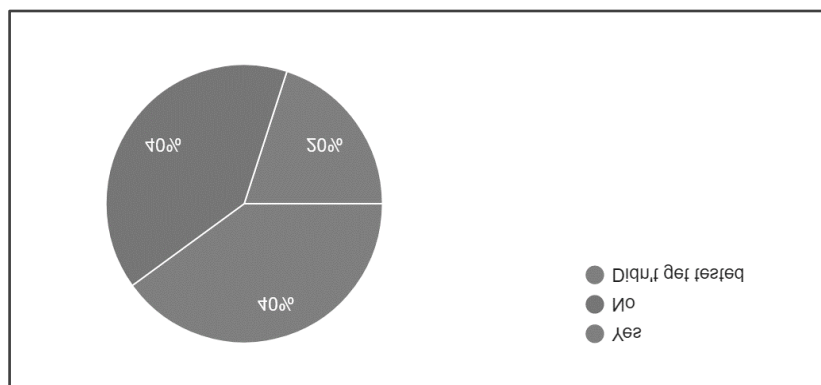
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Interpretation

As per the data, the maximum number of respondents belong to the 15-25 years age group, which is 43.6%. The second highest age group is 26-35 years with 21.8%, followed by the 46-55 years age group which is 20%, followed by the age group of 36-45 years and the group with the least number of respondents is older than 55 years, which is 5.4%.

Q1. Were you tested positive for COVID-19?

Table No. 2		
Options	Frequency	Percent
Yes	22	40
No	22	40
Didn't get tested	11	20
Total	55	100.0

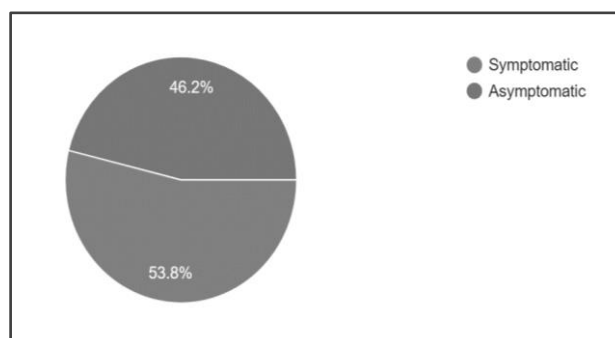


Interpretation

As per the data, majority of the respondents didn't get tested and those who did get tested were not tested positive for COVID-19, which is 40% in both groups. People who tested positive for COVID-19 are fairly lower, which is 20%

Q3. If yes, were you symptomatic or asymptomatic?

Table No. 3		
Options	Frequency	Percent
Symptomatic	14	53.8
Asymptomatic	12	46.2
Total	26	100.0

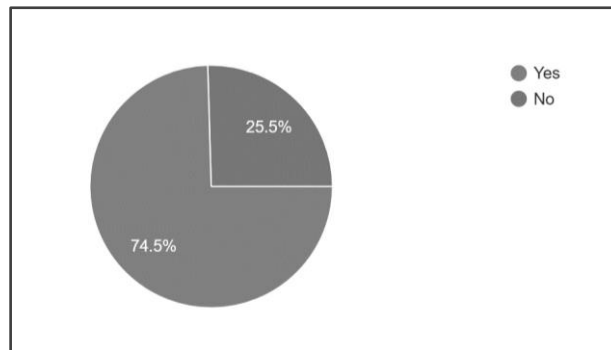


Interpretation

As per the data, majority of the respondents who tested positive for COVID-19 were symptomatic, which is 53.8%. Whereas, the rest were asymptomatic, which is 46.2%.

Q4. Did you take any home remedial measures for boosting your immunity?

Table No. 4		
Options	Frequency	Percent
Yes	41	74.5
No	14	25.5
Total	55	100.0

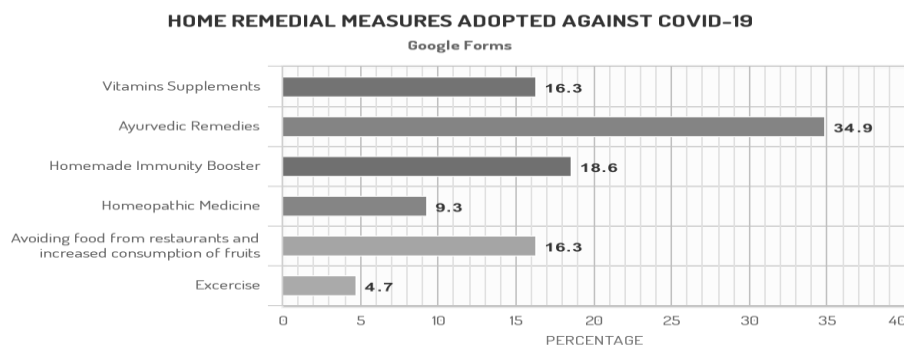


Interpretation

As per the data, majority of the respondents adopted for different home remedial measures for boosting their immunity, which is 74.5%. Whereas, others did not take any home remedial measures, which is 25.5%.

Q5. If yes, what measure did you adopt?

Table No. 5		
Common Home Remedial Measures	Frequency	Percent
Vitamin Supplements	7	16.3
Ayurvedic Remedies	15	34.9
Homemade Immunity Boosters	8	18.6
Homeopathic Medicine	4	9.3
Avoiding food from restaurants and increased consumption of fruits	7	16.3
Exercise	2	4.7
Total	43	100
Total Number of Responses	17	



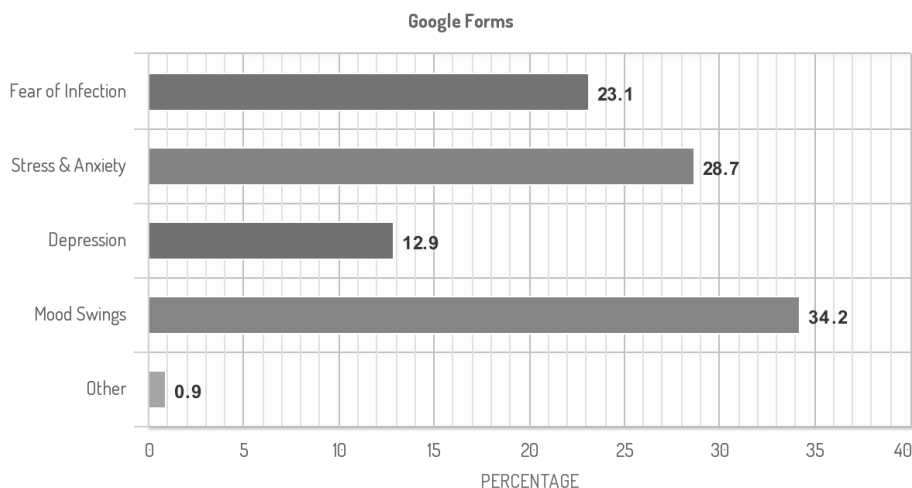
Interpretation

As per the data, majority of the respondents adopted Ayurvedic Remedies, which is 34.9%, followed by Homemade Immunity Boosters, which is 18.6%, followed by Vitamin Supplements and Avoiding food from restaurants and increased consumption of fruits, which is 16.3%, followed by Homeopathic Medicine, which is 16.3%. Exercise had the least frequency, which is 4.7%.

Q6. What effects did the pandemic & self-isolation have on your mental health?

Table No. 6		
Options	Frequency	Percent
Fear of infection	25	23.1
Stress & Anxiety	31	28.7
Depression	14	12.9
Mood Swings	37	34.2
Other	1	0.9
Total	108	100
Total Number of Responses	55	

MENTAL EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC & SELF-ISOLATION

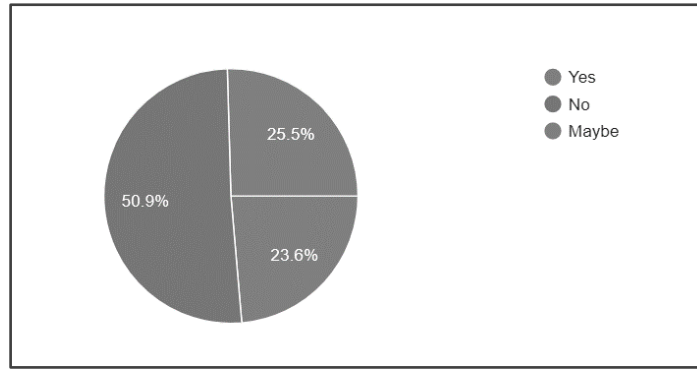


Interpretation

As per the data, majority of the respondents had mood swings due to the pandemic and self-isolation, which is 34.2%, followed by Stress & Anxiety, which is 28.7%, followed by Fear of Infection, which is 23.1%, followed by Depression, which is 12.9%. Other effects had the least frequency, which is 0.9%.

Q7. Did you believe the rumor that the COVID-19 virus would die with a rise in temperature in summer?

Table No. 7		
Options	Frequency	Percent
Yes	13	23.6
No	28	50.9
Maybe	14	25.5
Total	55	100.0

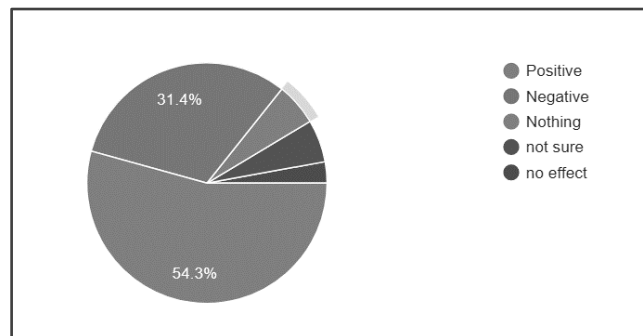


Interpretation

As per the data, majority of the respondents did not believe the rumor, which is 50.9%, followed by the group which was not sure, which is 25.5%. The group which did believe the rumor were the lowest, which is 23.6%.

Q8. If yes, what effect did it have on your mental state?

Table No. 8		
Options	Frequency	Percent
Positive	19	54.3
Negative	11	31.4
Other	5	14.3
Total	35	100.0

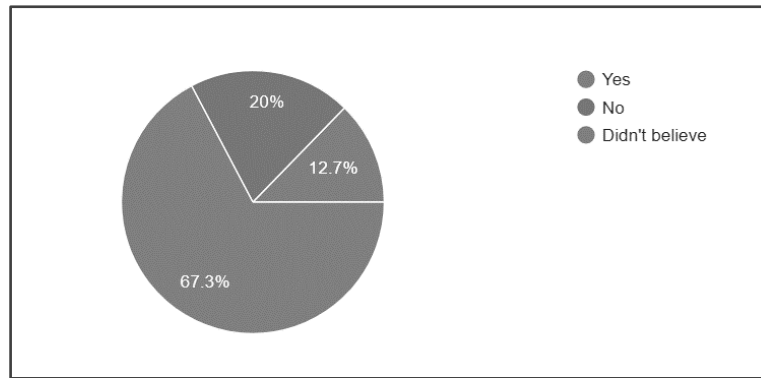


Interpretation

As per the data, majority of respondents who did believe the rumor had a positive effect on their mental state, which is 54.3%, followed by people who had a negative effect, which is 31.4%. Rest of the respondents belonged to the 'other' category and basically had no effect.

Q9. Did you participate in support of the Government campaign by banging utensils and clapping?

Table No. 9		
Options	Frequency	Percent
Yes	37	67.3
No	11	20
Didn't believe	7	12.7
Total	55	100.0

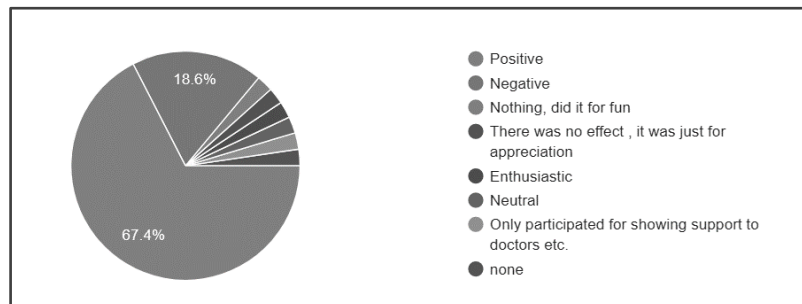


Interpretation

As per the data, majority of the respondents participated in support of the Government campaign by banging utensils and clapping, which is 67.3%, followed by the group which did not participate, which is 20%. Rest of the respondents didn't believe in so, which is 12.7%.

Q10. If yes, what effect did it have on your mental state?

Table No. 10		
Options	Frequency	Percent
Positive	29	67.4
Negative	8	18.6
Other	6	13.8
Total	43	100.0



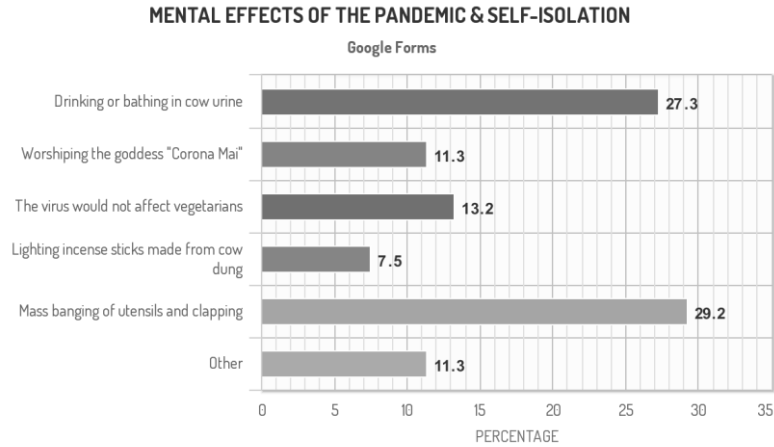
Interpretation

As per the data, majority of people who did participate in the government campaign had a positive impact on their mental state, which is 67.4%, followed by the group which had a negative impact on their mental state, which is 18.6%. Rest had effects other than the two options such as enthusiastic effect, neutral effect etc, which is 13.8%.

Q11. Which of the following superstitious beliefs related to COVID-19 are you aware of?

Table No. 10			
Options	Frequency	Percent	
Drinking or bathing in cow urine	29	27.3	
Worshipping the goddess "Corona Mai"	12	11.3	
The virus would not affect vegetarians	14	13.2	
Lighting incense sticks made from cow dung	8	7.5	

Mass banging of utensils and clapping	31	29.2	
Other	12	11.3	
Total	106	100	
Total Number of Responses	55		

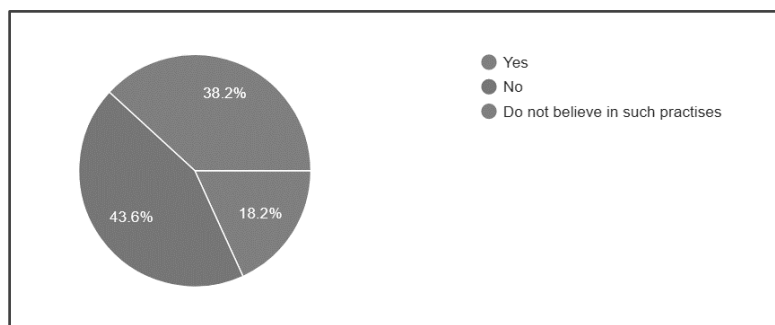


Interpretation

As per the data, majority of the respondents were aware of Mass banging of utensils and clapping, which is 29.2%, followed by Drinking or bathing in cow urine, which is 27.3%, followed by The virus would not affect vegetarians, which is 13.2%, followed by Worshipping the goddess "Corona Mai" and other, which is 11.3%. Respondents were least aware of the superstition "Lighting incense sticks made from cow dung."

Q12. Did you participate in any religious practices for protection against the disease?

Table No. 12		
Options	Frequency	Percent
Yes	10	18.2
No	24	43.6
Do not believe in such practices	21	38.2
Total	55	100.0

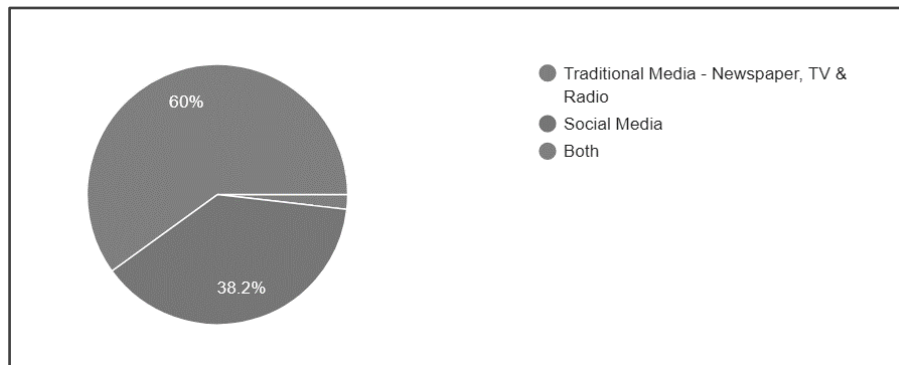


Interpretation

As per the data, majority of the respondents did not participate in any religious practices for protection against the disease, which is 43.6%, followed by the group which didn't believe in such practices in the first place, which is 38.2%. Rest, participated in such practices with a hope to get protection against COVID-19, which is 18.2%.

Q13. Which form of media do you believe is responsible for spreading fake news regarding the virus?

Table No. 13		
Options	Frequency	Percent
Traditional Media - Newspaper, TV & Radio	1	1.8
Social Media	21	38.2
Both	33	60
Total	55	100.0



Interpretation

As per the data, majority of the respondents believe both traditional media and social media are responsible for spreading fake news regarding the news, which is 60%, followed by the group which believed social media is responsible for so, which is 38.2%. Rest believed traditional media is responsible for spreading fake news regarding the virus, which is 1.8%.

6.0 Findings

- ✓ After the analyzing the data, we conclude that a majority of the respondents that were tested positive for COVID-19 were symptomatic, although another half that were asymptomatic, were very close to 50% of the total respondents. This indicates the fact that the immunity of Indian population is rather strong.
- ✓ The fear of the disease made majority of the respondents opt for a variety of home remedial measure for boosting there immunity. This indicates the impact of the disease outbreak on people, and how it brings out a necessary behavioral change in habits related to physical health and immunity of people.
- ✓ Majority of the respondents opted for Ayurvedic remedies for boosting their immunity. This is due to the fact that this alternative medicine system has its historical roots in the Indian subcontinent. For centuries, this system has provided the cure for many health issues and diseases. As of now, there is no cure for COVID-19, so it is important to boost immunity for reducing its ill-effects, due to which Indians relied on traditional, ages old Ayurvedic recipes.
- ✓ Other measures included taking supplements, immunity boosters, increased consumption of healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables, avoiding food from restaurants and exercise, which focuses on increasing intake of necessary vitamins and nutrients, keeping the body fit and reducing chances of contact with the virus.
- ✓ As per the data, people had many ill-effects on their mental health as well. Due to COVID-19

being a serious threat, fear of infection was common among people, whereas, self-isolation brought loneliness into people's life which most commonly caused mood swings, followed by stress and anxiety and depression. Such responses makes coping up with such mental issues, an important topic. People should take the help of their family and friends, and should consult experts.

- ✓ Although half of the respondents didn't believe the rumor that claimed death of the COVID-19 virus in summer, a portion of the other half did or were not sure if they believed it or not. This indicates how desperate people becomes for a global threat to die, as they know that if it doesn't die, the lives of their loved ones and themselves will be at stake.
- ✓ Majority of the respondents did participate in support of the government campaign by banging utensils and clapping while the motives were different. Some did so to show a sense of gratitude towards the front-line workers who were putting their lives at stake such as doctors etc. While others just did so as the whole activity was enthusiastic and fun. The whole event's motive was to show gratitude towards the workers on the front-line, but the reception of this message turned out to be a bit faulty as many groups of people came together to participate in the event, ignoring social distancing. Many rumors also arose, claiming the "positive vibrations" from the activity would subdue the disease.
- ✓ High number of respondents were aware of the usage of cow urine for curing the disease. This was so, because from ages, *Gowmutra* or cow urine has been used by people as they believe it's the cure for every health issue. Followed the superstitions and misbeliefs like the virus didn't affect vegetarians, as initially it was believed that the virus travelled from animal meat and many narrow-minded Indians believed non-vegetarians are "sinners", and, people worshiping the virus as a goddess for sparing their lives, as a desperate measure.
- ✓ While majority of the respondents were young adults, the data shows that people did not participate or did not believe in religious practices for protection against the disease., while the older portion of the respondents did participate. This indicates the difference is mindsets between younger and older generation, and highlights performing religious practices as another desperate measure for protection against the disease.
- ✓ Believing rumors and participating in religious practices had mostly a positive effect on mental health of the people. This indicates that believing some misbeliefs and superstitions can provide people a soothing effect, relieving them from stress, anxiety and fear of infection, and that's why superstitious beliefs still arise in modern society also.
- ✓ Majority of the respondents held both forms of media - traditional and social media responsible for spreading fake news regarding the disease while most leaned towards social media. This indicates that social media can be an unreliable source of information, as it lacks fact-checking, but also traditional media must not use sensational news as a ticket for more TRP, readership or listeners, and should focus more on important news.

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