

Myths and Magic during the Coronavirus Epidemic: Anecdotes from India

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ABSTRACT

The coronavirus pandemic has caused unprecedented changes in human life all over the world. As is the case with any unknown or unseen natural calamity, this pandemic has also given rise to a lot of myths and rumors. This article is an attempt to document some of those folklores for posterity.

Keywords: COVID-19, Cure, Myth, Rumor.

Bengal Physician Journal (2019): 10.5005/jp-journals-10070-6122

The coronavirus epidemic struck the world in January 2020 and by March, it was a pandemic with a daily death toll of over a thousand all over the world. By mid-April more than 5,000 people were dying per day. As with any public health disaster, this event also gave rise to a lot of rumors and myths. Just after the onset of the epidemic, scientists were still in the process of analyzing the results and were unable to provide quick answers to the myriad questions of their countrymen. This void of unanswered questions was filled by these hearsay and myths. In this article, mainly the myths circulating in India will be discussed. However, toward the end of this article, the urban myths of other countries will also be discussed in brief because in the modern day of social media, myths can travel long distances with just one Facebook or WhatsApp post.

In the initial period, the most notable myth was the curative property of cow dung and cow urine. Some businessmen were promoting cow urine as a cure for the viral infection. The urine was sold in jars at Rs. 500 a liter and people were encouraged to drink it. Even a cow urine drinking party was held in some parts of the country and some people drank the urine in front of live TV. Others claimed that smearing cow dung on the walls of houses can ward off the virus and cow dung cakes were sold. Another group of unscrupulous businessmen started selling alcohol-free hand sanitizer made from distilled cow urine. This was falsely claimed to be virucidal. The item was marked "non-refundable" online and it quickly ran out of stock. Even some temples started using cow urine as hand sanitizer. There were later reports of people falling sick after drinking cow urine. This brings to mind a similar trend of drinking camel urine during the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) epidemic in the Middle East. The World Health Organization had to issue a warning against that practice at the time of the MERS epidemic.

Other popular claims included applying two drops of sesame oil into the nostrils daily. Yoga practice was also said to boost immunity and prevent illness.

Some Yoga gurus promoted a herbal concoction consisting of, among other things, basil leaves and turmeric, to protect people from the coronavirus. Someone suggested making herbal hand sanitizers at home. Such sanitizers are not likely to be effective as a microbicide agent unless they contain suitable concentration of alcohol.

Some people urged the public to go vegetarian to prevent infection. They said that eating the meat of different animals was

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How to cite this article: Paul R. Myths and Magic during the Coronavirus Epidemic: Anecdotes from India. *Bengal Physician Journal* 2019;6(3):48–50.

Source of support: Nil

Conflict of interest: None

the cause for emergence of coronavirus. Frequent allusions were made to the eating habits of the Chinese population. In social media, racist people commented about the exotic animals and birds consumed by the "Chinese" and alleged that such "nasty" habits were responsible for the epidemic. Another religious group claimed that coronavirus is divine punishment for eating meat and boasted that vegetarians would never suffer from the infection.

Some people started selling anticoronavirus mattress. While the very idea seems ludicrous and utterly misleading, some businessmen tried this technique of making a quick buck. The ads were soon canceled after a public outcry.

A religious leader said that corona is not a virus but an "avatar" to protect the animals. He said that it is God's punishment for the meat eaters. He even suggested that China should form an idol of the "corona" and worship it in order to seek forgiveness; the population of China should also pledge not to harm animals for food in the future. Only then the disease would disappear. This incident brings to mind the claim by some religious leaders in the USA that 9/11 was a divine retribution for homosexuality. Similarly, the 2004 Tsunami in Indian Ocean was seen by many in Indonesia as God's punishment for drinking alcohol and female liberation.

Some religious leaders believed that those who worshipped God and protected the holy cow were not likely to get the infection. Some godmen in India, who lived as hermit, claimed that they had long seen this apocalypse coming and had isolated themselves already.

There were a lot of social media posts against China. China was openly accused of spreading the virus for their own economic gain. Since new cases in China had almost reduced to zero by mid-March while in Europe the mortality was surging, it was alleged that China had engineered the virus and was crippling the society of Europe. It was claimed that China had manufactured this “bioweapon” and was using it to attack the Western World. Now, it would use the pandemic to further its financial and business interests. China was also accused by the public of hiding the disease in the beginning. But this statement is utterly false as Chinese scientists had uploaded the full genomic sequence of the virus online by January 10, only 11 days after reporting of the first case. At a local level, people of Chinese descent were often the target of public humiliation. They were seen as source of the virus, even if they had no contact with China. Many were openly accused of spreading the virus in the community. This was not something peculiar to India, and people of Chinese descent also faced similar discrimination in Europe. In social media, many people called for boycott of China as punishment for spreading the epidemic. This attitude brings to mind the similar xenophobic tendencies in Europe against the Jews during the plague epidemic.

Also, doctors and nurses faced similar social ostracism. Since they worked at hospitals, it was thought that they were carrying the deadly virus back home. Hence, they were often asked to leave their flats or rented homes. In some, particularly inhuman incidents, hospital workers were outright expelled from their localities. There were many Facebook posts of Indian doctors who had faced unimaginable cruelties in the hands of their neighbors. This happened more in villages than towns. In Kolkata, for example, nurses from Northeast states often faced social obstacles and many had to leave the state in the 2nd week of May 2020. In many places, there were rumors that many positive cases have been found in some hospitals but the facts have been suppressed. In some localities, there were rumors that many local people have been apprehended for hiding their foreign travel history. Outsiders stopped going to the markets and shops of those localities. Cremation of people dying from coronavirus was often protested by local people. In many cases, the police had to intervene for the cremation to go ahead.

As during the black death of Europe, astrological explanations for the coronavirus epidemic were promoted. Many astrologers said that they had already predicted this turmoil months ago. They blamed certain imaginary positioning of imaginary celestial bodies as a cause for this pandemic. Many astrologers even went so far as to predict the exact date and time when the pandemic would cease. Many astrologers urged people to follow a “satvik” lifestyle to prevent the infection.

People believing in the mythology of India even commented that this was the promised “kali” yug. Kali yug is the promised period of Hindu mythology when the world will be destroyed and the glorious ancient days of pure human nature will come back. They commented that the corona was the “Kalki” avatar which has come down to destroy the present times and create a new world order. They said that increasing human greed and debauchery is the reason for this epidemic.

Many people commented that since North Korea and Russia were not much affected by the epidemic, this was a planned enterprise. It would destroy the USA, the Western World, and the world economy. [Utterly false; Russia also had a lot of mortality.]

One common theme of discussion online was the live animal market in China and its responsibility for the epidemic. They said that the wet market of China has always been the source of epidemics. They said that the government of China is not sincere in their efforts to curb the possibility of animal-to-human spread of various pathogens in these markets. It was also said that the utilization of various wild animals in the traditional Chinese medicine industry is another reason for the emergence of such novel pathogens. The origin of the coronavirus epidemic is still a matter of research and no scientist knows for sure where the virus originated from. And live animal markets are not the monopoly of China. Similar markets exist all over the world, including India. [For example, it is very common to see live seafood markets along the coasts of Kerala or exotic meat markets in some places of Northeast India.]

One of the most potent weapons against the spread of coronavirus is complete restriction of human-to-human contact. As news of a possible social lockdown spread via the media, there was ‘panic buying’ of essential items in the markets. The author himself listened to such street rumors as, “wholesale market will be closed down” and “trains will stop, so nothing will be coming.” Many houses where people with frequent foreign travel lived, were pointed out, and people alleged that they were hiding the patients. In many cases, people returning from abroad were subjected to harassment by their neighbors.

In the villages, people started eating *Thankuni* leaves. This is a ground creeper in Bengal. At night, people would go out in the bushes with torches and pluck the leaves. This is *Centella asiatica* or Indian pennywort. While it is a harmless herb which is used normally by many Indians, excess use for the epidemic may cause side effects. Some viral social media videos said that eating a spoonful of mud with basil leaf is protective. Some said hanging a block of turmeric root in the doorway is protective. In the suburban areas, people started following these bizarre customs. In one village of Bengal, all men shaved their heads after a rumor spread that the coronavirus was present in the hair. On March 21, in some villages, there was a sudden rumor of digging the soil in the northwest corner of the garden to get coal or ash. This was then smeared on the forehead. Many people started blowing the conch shell with the belief that this sound would kill the virus. One Bollywood celebrity even tried to promote this concept of sound killing the virus on Twitter. He even invoked the mythical concept of the new moon as a time when microbes become “stronger” and asked people to blow their conch shells on that day to kill the virus.

An astrologer started selling a chant (mantra) to get rid of the coronavirus. The mantra was said to possess a power to ward off the infection.

India is the land of godmen and gurus. So the coronavirus also gave rise to a new godman: *Coronawale baba*. He claimed that he had a *tabij* (amulet) that could prevent the coronavirus infection. His advertisement in Lucknow even claimed that those who could not buy masks or sanitizers can buy his amulet for protection.

A vast population of people in India believe in Ayurveda and homeopathy. Some ayurvedic practitioners claimed to have found cures for the virus. Some promoted *aswagandha* as a cure.

Some social media posts claimed that drinking hot water or alcohol can kill the virus or gargling with hot water and salt or vinegar can help. A political leader claimed that standing in the sun for some time every day can ward off the infection. Garlic was

promoted as an immune booster to prevent the infection. Similar claims were made for *haritaki* and *trikatu* with warm water or Unani decoctions like *Khamira Marwareed*. Some government agencies claimed that some homeopathic medicines can cure the coronavirus. Many experts immediately debunked it.

Another myth, which was made popular in some media, was that tea drinking could ward off the virus. Even a Chinese physician was “quoted” as having discovered this miracle cure. But like other myths, it was also debunked.

One more rumor which spread widely was eating poultry can spread the disease. This was, of course, false. But this led to a steep fall in chicken sales all over the country. In the author’s experience, dressed chicken meat, which was selling at Rs. 200 a kg, came down to Rs. 100 or even Rs. 50/- a kg in some places.

European and American myths also spread among some sections of the Indian society via social media. Although these were not as popular, still some people believed them. Some of them were:

- Frequent drinking of water can cure the disease.
- Blowing hot air from hair dryers on the face
- Colloidal silver solutions as cure

- Vitamin C in large doses to immediately boost immunity
- Drinking bleach or washing mouth with bleach solutions

In later periods, other myths which spread included 5G mobile phone towers as source of the coronavirus and breast milk as a cure for the virus. In the UK, many phone towers were set on fire after this conspiracy theory became popular. In some social media sites, another myth was spread: microwaving paper and mail can kill the coronavirus. Many famous newspapers were full of articles about “immunity boosting” diet.

These different myths and false information are not only innocuous blips in the information highway. They can sometimes cause real harm as people can be persuaded to abandon real public health advisory and follow such pseudoscientific and false folk remedies instead. Everyone should be aware of these myths in the times of epidemic.

REFERENCES

The author meticulously collected these anecdotes from various newspapers and online discussion groups over three-and-a-half months. Also Facebook discussions were followed.