



MASS MEDIA SUPPORTED MYTHS AND FALLACIES – A MODERN SCOURGE

Our contemporary cyber-scientific age is riddled with intriguing contradictions and human-made follies that belie the advances in technology. The mass-media-driven consumer culture and entertainment industry has fueled the growth of primitive super-



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tions, myths and new age beliefs that are the very antithesis of science.

The dire need to promote a rational discussion on science, technology and equitable social development in a market-capitalist environment has never been so pressing. One must assiduously guard against trends that promote myth and be aware of the subtle persuasive techniques, marketing strategies and advertisement gimmicks that make us increasingly helpless consumers.

Strongly emotive words that appeal to one's core values and grossly false analogies are drawn to promote free market ideology by depicting the consumer as king and the market as his empire. Subtle ideas that promote agendas and values that support consumption are ingrained through clever visual imagery, tantalizing graphics and sound effects.

Wholly unworthy products are embedded in popular entertainment, movies and general advertising. Innocent children are highly susceptible to propaganda and become soft targets for ruthless mind control. No wonder that children want things that are advertised in television commercials. They are made brand conscious from a tender age and grow up as trained and loyal customers.

The unconcealed and shameless motto for many brand managers is to hook them young. They often hire the best psychologists and designers to invent ways that entice kids to buy their products using peer pressure while fostering a life time allegiance to their brand.

The increasing numbers of television channels are willing to cater to anything that will amuse people until their death. The largely unethical lucrative entertainment business thrives on sensational soap operas, family "tele" dramas, tele-shopping, sponsor-paid news, subliminal advertising, propagating doomsday theories, fake reality shows, mythological story serials, fear and uncertainty mongering, superstitious themes, faith preaching and dedicated time slots for highly paid bogus-astrology, feng-shui, varsthu and yoga exponents.

Useless products are hawked with scientific sounding words and serious labels to fool people who are not familiar with their precise meaning. This way, books written on quantum healing, thought waves, precious-stone power, subtle energy fields, scientific astrology and trans-dimensional energy are popular even among highly educated people who want to be experts in other areas.

Man's relentless struggle to understand his environment also created a basis for supernatural beliefs, cultural taboos, superstitions and ritual practices to please while appeasing the powerful and bad-tempered gods who allegedly controlled the destiny of earthly beings. So, most civilizations around the world have developed their own fascinating stories resembling myths about the universe. These primitive belief systems were eventually transformed into organized and powerful religions forcing people into dogmatic conformity and eternal servitude.

The scientific approach and rational thinking have largely triumphed in understanding several aspects of our physical universe. The meteoric rise of science has altered the very landscape of human existence. Basic research and gradual advancement in technology have thus far exceeded the capacity of ordinary minds.

Science has not disappointed those few who know how to harness its latent power. Despite many remarkable achievements, some 'modern' societies are also deeply mired in contradictions, absurdities, propaganda and irrational belief systems. Due to lack of better skills, we fail to make

independent and critical evaluations of what we see, read and hear.

It is worse when the information is deliberately distorted to mislead the recipient in some predetermined and insidious way. The distinction between beneficial and useless, genuine and fraudulent, just and wrongful, factual and fictitious, true and false thus becomes blurred. Someone else then enters, who can take control over our mental faculties.

Fear of critical and independent thinking, for example, makes people extremely vulnerable. It compels them to seek guidance and personal cure from sources that are hardly benign and authentic but opportunistic and vile.

The definition of "proof" is corrupted by parasites who feed on gullibility. Traditionally, the burden of proof lay with those who made the claim in the first place. For example, there is hardly a shred of scientific evidence to support intelligent design. However, science does not completely explain all phenomena. So far, evidences (genetics, DNA sequencing, fossil records) exist, which independently prove that life

has indeed evolved on Earth.

A belief (even of science being credible) should come from positive evidence supporting claims and not from the lack of evidence for or against it. Therefore, one cannot disprove the existence of aliens, invisible beings or other life forms. It does not mean they exist; neither does it imply that they don't exist.

The forces of propaganda create impossible odds, but we can certainly take some discrete steps to stay immune from it. Most people have an apathetic attitude towards propaganda. While we do not ridicule or scorn human motivations, we must understand them before attempting to influence them.

We must learn how to identify various forms and means of propaganda and understand how human thinking can work against them.

The underlying causes of mythical or misguided beliefs and attendant propaganda machinery which reinforce and exploit human fallibility for communal, political and financial purposes cannot be completely eradicated.

However, we can confront this by cultivating certain habits of the mind that promote critical thinking and sound reasoning. An acquaintance and understanding of various kinds of myths, superstitions and propaganda tactics can reduce the likelihood of deception and entrapment.

The habit of raising doubts and asking questions can prevent the formation of dubious beliefs. The authenticity of claims should be checked from credible and independent resources. Unfortunately, we cannot expect to get a fair coverage of an event or a breaking story, if the reporters are given patronage by interested lobby groups who want only one side of the matter exposed.

Making realistic and informed choices is the essence of democratic principles. Just as it is imperative to combat the menace of superstitions, pseudoscience and irrational practices in society, we must recognize and resist the sophisticated ploys used by the entertainment industry, marketers and mass media that reduce people to helpless and passive consumers.

The struggle for reliance on science and rationality has to overcome many obstacles. In doing so, let me recall the inspiring words of George Orwell, "In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act."

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