

1 Indian Idols Drinking Milk: Understanding the Phenomenon and 2 its Implications for Social Reform

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6

7 **Abstract**

8 The mass media have occasionally been reporting miracles such as stone idols sipping milk or
9 bleeding in India. The author argues for viewing such irrational happenings as the examples
10 of the social psychological phenomenon of conformity to the group norms (i.e., informal,
11 unwritten prescriptions of what the group might think to be right and desirable). By
12 identifying people as likely (1) sources of accurate information and (2) standards of desirable
13 behaviors in a given situation, it is proposed that a shift from conformity to the norms to
14 compliance to the laws might be helpful in building a New India.

15

16 **Index terms**— conformity, compliance, information, miracle, norms, pressure, reform, scientific.

17 **1 I.**

18 Indian Idols Drinking Milk n the early morning of September 21, 1995, a Hindu priest in the temple of Lord
19 Ganesh in New Delhi witnessed the stone idol sipping milk from a spoon. Those who heard of the miracle rushed
20 to their adjacent temples across India and observed the same. Experiences of people of Hindu religion across
21 the globe were no different. 1 Comparable miracles have recently been reported in case of idols in other temples
22 as illustrated by the following news: Savan 2019 Miracle in Lord Shiva Temple Nandi and Ganesh Idol Drink
23 Milk Amar Ujala, June 29, 2019 2 Lord Shiva ? Deity Nandi's Idols Drinking Spoonful of Milk? You Decide
24 India TV. News, June 29, 2019 3 The Constitution of India envisages developing "the scientific temper [emphasis
25 added]? and the spirit of inquiry and reform [emphasis added]" as one of the fundamental duties of the people
26 of Republic of India (Basu, 1993, p. 131). In science, an observable occurrence is called phenomenon. Does the
27 news about stone or metal idols sip milk then qualify to be a phenomenon? If the phenomenon is different from
28 the news reports or the individual beliefs, how can social scientific inquiry unravel its possible mechanisms and
29 inform subsequent social reforms and policy intervention in India? II.

30 **2 Physical Versus Social Reality**

31 Humans tend to pursue truth. Toward this goal, they first rely on physical evidence. For example, one can
32 confirm that the sun rises in the east or the west by getting up early in the morning and checking the direction.
33 Similarly, one can determine one's height through a measuring tape and weight through a weighing machine.
34 These yardsticks supposedly provide accurate information about physical reality.

35 However, physical standards are not so readily available for one's perceptions, attitudes, and opinions. What
36 is the future of opposition parties in India? Is the global recession imminent? Is January 14, Makar Sakranti,
37 the best day to take a holy dip in the Ganges? Should one worship Lord Shiva or Vishnu? Is the Government
38 of India (GOI) correct in amending the citizenship act? To validate answers to these questions, one has to turn
39 to other people (Singh et al. 2017). What others think, feel, and do constitute social reality (Festinger 1950,
40 1954). Thus, one evaluates the correctness of one's perceptions, thoughts, and behaviors relative to those of peers
41 (Festinger 1954).

42 **3 III.**

43 **4 Social Influence**

44 In a meeting, clapping by one person leads others to clap and laughter by one person makes others laugh.
45 On the road, when one driver blows horns or spits, others mimic. The demonstrations against the citizenship
46 amendment act of the GOI in Assam led to Academics from the Indian Institute of Technology and the Tata
47 Institute of Fundamental Research in Mumbai, Maharashtra declined to comment on such "religious matters"
48 although such occurrences were at odds with their espoused scientific temper. However, Prabir Ghosh-a Kolkata
49 based rationalist called such reports as absurd: "I can prove that it is no miracle." 4 Nevertheless, the news report
50 continued to attract contrasting views from people of different groups and faiths. In this article, the author-
51 an experimental social psychologist-first construes the mass perception of irrational happenings as conformity
52 to the norms (Asch 1951, 1952; Sherif 1936, 1937) and then unravels the possible mechanisms underlying this
53 phenomenon to draw implications for social change in India. similar and even violent demonstrations and protests
54 across the nation. 5 Such examples of following the herd are evident in the contemporary hair styles, fashions,
55 and how people talk over their mobile phones.

56 Why do people get influenced by statements and deeds of peers? Believing requires neither time nor effort
57 but disbelieving demands both. Worse, disbelieving does not close the search of truth. In contrast, interpreting
58 what peers say as possibly true and what they do as possibly desirable in a given situation completes the pursuit
59 of truth. Thus, people tend to perceive, feel, and act in ways others do, illustrating conformity to the emergent
60 norms.

61 **5 IV. Two Classic Social Psychological Experiments on Confor-
62 mity a) Autokinetic effect**

63 The autokinetic effect is a perceptual illusion in which an otherwise stationary point of light projected in a dark
64 room appears to be moving. Social psychologist Sherif (1936, 1937) hypothesized that the agreement to estimated
65 distance moved by the stationary light would be more when the perceiver is in a group than when he is alone.

66 To test the foregoing hypothesis, Sherif first asked the participants individually to estimate the distance that
67 the light had moved. As expected, the individual estimates were very different. When the participant was placed
68 in a group of two other persons and they were asked to announce their estimates publicly, the judgments of
69 distance moved converged by the third session. That is, individual participants agreed with each other about the
70 distance moved by the stationary point of light.

71 The norm of autokinetic effect developed in the group was also internalised by the participants. Even while
72 reporting (a) individually, (b) after a year of the original experiment, and (c) in other groups of people, those
73 participants adhered to their respective original groups' estimates. Given that there was no peer pressure for
74 conformity at all under these three circumstances, the influence of the original group on them was interpreted
75 to be purely informational. That is, peers essentially served as sources of information about what was the true
76 movement in the otherwise stationary point of light.

77 **6 b) Pressure to go along**

78 To get along, people go along with others. What others say and do thus put subtle peer pressure to conform. To
79 demonstrate this mechanism, social psychologist Asch (1951, 1952) conducted another experiment. In a given
80 session on perceptual judgments, he showed SIX confederates and ONE participant two cards such as on the
81 left and right sides below: There were two experimental manipulations in a group setting. First, the seating
82 arrangements were such that the confederates of the experimenter always spoke before the participant. Second,
83 the confederates initially gave a variety of answers to eliminate suspicion in the participant and then incorrect
84 responses in a preplanned manner. For example, all the six confederates would say Bar A or C equals to Bar R.
85 The point of interest lied in showing that the participant might conform to the opinion of the incorrect majority.
86 As expected, 76% of the participants conformed on at least one trial and 50% of them conformed on more than
87 half of the trials of the experiment. Overall, participants conformed to the incorrect majority on 37% of the
88 target trials.

89 **7 c) Comparison between the two experiments**

90 In the case of the auto-kinetic effect, participants turned to each other for information. A norm was developing
91 about possible accuracy of estimated distance moved by the stationary point of light. Participants conformed
92 because they believed others to be correct. In the case of perceptual judgments, in contrast, cohesiveness was
93 critical. Participants found themselves to be under awkward pressure of going along with the incorrect majority.
94 To get along, the participant went along with others. Findings of brainimaging research indicate that those who
95 conform in Asch-type settings also perceive the situation as everyone else does (Berns, Chappelow, Zink, Paganoni,
96 Martin-Skurski, & Richards 2005). That is, the loci of conformity were in both perception and behavior.

97 The pressure toward conformity in a misleading group that Asch (1951, 1952) demonstrated is a universal
98 phenomenon, not confined to a laboratory setting or the time period in which the experiment was originally

99 conducted. More crucially, findings related to conformity were robust across 130 experiments conducted at
100 different points of time across 17 nations (Sunstein 2003).

101 To avoid appearing as religiously deviants, people agree to the misleading majority. The fear of rejection by
102 the group is high also because Indians seem to worship more out of fear than devotion as sarcastically portrayed
103 in the Hindi movie OMG: Oh My God! 8 The author contends, therefore, that the so-called miracles mentioned
104 in the endnotes can be explained by a social psychological phenomenon of conformity to the norms of erroneous
105 perceptions and behaviors of others around us.

106 **8 V. Implications for Scientific Inquiry and Social Reform**

107 The laboratory experiments of Sherif (1936, 1937) and Asch (1951, 1952) help conceptualize endorsement
108 of irrational perceptions, feelings, beliefs, and behaviors as instances of conformity to the norms. This
109 conceptualisation has two key implications for promoting the scientific temper and the spirit of inquiry and
110 reform as envisaged in the Constitution of India.

111 **9 VI.**

112 **10 Conclusion**

113 In sum, drinking of milk by the idols in India is a social psychological phenomenon of conformity to the emergent
114 norms instead of a miracle by the god. People adhere to such irrational cognition because others serve as sources
115 of likely accurate information and of signals of likely desirable behaviors. The extant knowledge of these two
116 mechanisms underlying conformity to the norms can now be used to demand compliance to the laws and rules
117 formulated by the legitimate authorities and followed by most citizens. Such strategies by social institutions have
118 been effective in regulating perceptions and behaviours across the globe (Blair, Littman, & Paluck 2019). It is
119 high time for psychologists in India to study the new norms and for the media to give them the much needed
120 support in shaping the new psyche of India.

121 participants were strangers to one another. There was no chance that they would meet again. Nonetheless,
122 the information from the group and the motivation to go along with the group had tremendous impact on
123 their judgments and behaviors. If the state and national policies are now directed at demanding compliance to
124 the laws, the dream of New India will be served better. 11 In fact, the information given and the compliance
125 desired should be simple to understand and implement. The two recent examples of such policy formulation are
126 compliance to submission of income tax returns 12 and the new motor vehicle rules. 13 To the above, it should be
127 added that the Internet, television, and other popular media should assume the further responsibility of playing a
128 constructive role in constructing the NEW REALITY in the nation. They should highlight what is scientifically
129 accurate and socially desirable in the current period but refrain from propagating news that foster blind faith
130 and behaviors that are easy to conform to (e.g., gimmicks to improve upon one's lot through astrology, fasting,
131 gem rings, horoscope, raksha sutra, religious lockets, tabij, witchcrafts, etc.).

132 The first implication pertains to the role and relevance of many traditions and festivals (e.g., Chhath,
133 Christmas, Diwali, Dussehra, Eid Al-Fitr, Ganesh Chaturthi, Holi, Lohri, Pongal, Shivratri, to mention a few).
134 Although they were founded on conformity to the norms of their respective periods, they have become so deeply
135 entrenched in the human psyche that their relevance for the modern life is rarely questioned (Jacobs & Campbell
136 1961; MacNeil & Sherif 1976). For example, the aftermaths of Ganesh Chaturthi 9 or Diwali 10 that pose severe
137 threats to lives, liberties, and environment have disturbingly attracted a rather limited debate and corrective
138 action. Therefore, it is timely for all Indians to revisit and re-evaluate their herd behaviors and strive for an
139 individual and social behavior that is more aligned to the Constitution of India.

140 The second implication of conformity to the norms is for the formulation and implementation of new policies.
141 Participants in the Sherif (1936, 1937) experiment viewed others as sources of information. Those in the Asch
142 (1951, 1952) experiment displayed "motivation not to stick out" (Sleek, 2019, p. 10). The

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