IT was hilarious to recently read reports of women sleeping with helmets on in some parts of north India just so their hair would not be cut off by evil spirits. But it was saddening too. And highly unfortunate, that in this day and age of science huge masses of our fellow brethren still continue to remain shackled by superstitions and get swayed by ill-founded rumours. Rituals were conducted and priests consulted in these areas to ward off the evil spirits. But this is not the first time that people have been so gripped by mass hysteria. There have been several earlier instances including Ganesha idols drinking milk, Jesus idols dripping holy water or shedding tears, waters around the Haji Ali Dargah turning miraculously ‘sweet’, and of course the ‘monkey man’ hysteria some years back. In fact, in the year 2013, 40 villages in Madhya Pradesh celebrated Diwali two-and-a-half months early driven by the superstition that if anyone failed to celebrate Diwali during the rains, every family would lose its eldest son or face calamity.

When more people join the ranks of the gullible and a critical mass is reached, it can easily get converted into a mass hysteria where everyone performs the same irrational act with the ‘feeling’ of engaging in an intelligent act. This is a state of collective hallucination where groups of people virtually turn into zombies losing all sense of reasoning.

Incidentally, at around the same time as people in some parts of the country were succumbing to irrational beliefs, India lost three of its stalwart scientists. Ironically, two of these great scientists also campaigned relentlessly throughout their life against superstitions and ill-founded beliefs, and urged people to adopt reasoning and questioning as a way of life. Prof. U.R. Rao was among the key architects of India’s space programme that has seen India reaching not just the Moon but faraway Mars as well. Prof. Yash Pal was a passionate science communicator and Prof. P.M. Bhargava a strident critic of unscientific beliefs and superstitions.

Even as we mourn the loss of these great scientists, we also need to introspect and envision ways and means of unshackling our populations from the grip of irrational behaviour. Education alone is not helping. Sustained scientific literacy campaigns should be made integral parts of science festivals, exhibitions and other scientific events converging eventually into a mass science literacy movement.

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