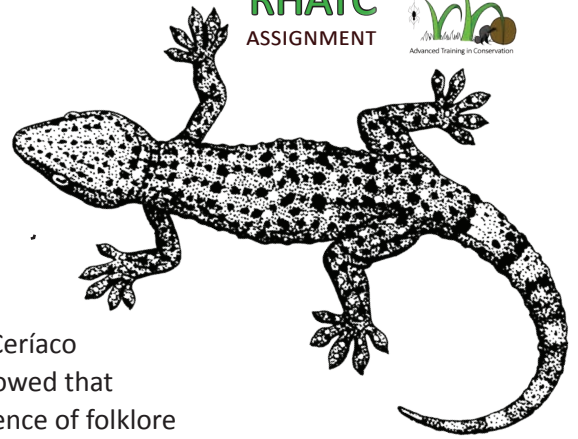


Superstitions and the Gecko: A Lesson in Coexistence



Superstitions have been part of human life for centuries and surprisingly not limited to the nation, culture, and geography. They arise from fear, faith, and sometimes unknown reasons. In India, these beliefs are rooted in culture and traditions, influencing how we see certain animals, one such superstition is about tiny, wall-climbing lizards. There are many superstition stories revolving around this small creature, the Gecko, across the world.

In my hometown in Uttar Pradesh, there is a superstition that killing a Gecko brings bad omen to the family. And if a gecko falls on your body, then you have to spread salt on your roof to remove the negative energy. When I started digging into this superstition, I came across many other beliefs around geckos. In my own region, I found that when geckos fall, they spread rice all over the body. These stories are passed down from generation to generation without any valid explanations.

Proverbs, sayings, and information provided by numerous informants show that the common small house geckos are regarded as ominous creatures associated with ill fortune. They are also considered highly impure, and thought to be carriers of leprosy and other diseases (Frembgen 1996).

How can a little creature have the power to bring misfortune? It's unreasonable to spread salt on the roof when a gecko falls. Salt has antibacterial and antifungal qualities that help kill germs and bacteria, but how salt removes the misfortune is beyond understanding.

In southern Portugal, for example, locals believe that geckos are poisonous and cause skin diseases when they touch a person. A study by (Ceríaco et al. 2011) found that about 25% of the local people believed geckos were poisonous, while 24% thought they transmitted skin diseases (da Silva et al. 2011). Like us, these beliefs have made the local people afraid of lizards, even though this animal is harmless and helps by eating mosquitoes and other insects.

Another study by Ceríaco (2012) showed that “the presence of folklore and negative values clearly predicts persecution and anti-conservation attitudes towards reptiles” (da Silva et al. 2012). This shows that superstition can influence people's behavior with these animals, leading to fear and even killing rather than coexistence.

Due to the fear of bad omen, people chase the lizards away. What if everyone starts believing in this superstition? What will happen to its population? These are questions we forget while chasing the lizards away.

Geckos play a vital role in maintaining the household and garden ecosystem. They are excellent insect population controller; feeding on mosquitoes, flies, cockroaches, and other small insects. If gecko populations decline it will have harmful effects to humans and crops. These also act as prey for birds and snakes. Harming them disrupts the ecological balance and it leads to an increase in insect population.

A more recent study by da Silva et al. (2021) found that fear and hatred towards reptiles decreases when people have more contact and awareness about them. This indicates that knowledge and awareness play a significant role in moving communities beyond fear and superstition.

Overall, it is important to understand that these small creatures do not bring bad luck to anyone, in fact, in most cases, they act in our favour. Our fear and false belief only harm the environment and disturb the balance of life around us. We should learn to coexist and respect every life that contributes to the nature's harmony.

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Behind the Blessings

The colorful and intricately designed ornaments and clothes with decorative parasols, aromatic scented incense and flowers all around, festival drumbeats, and crackers popping everywhere; featuring elephants as the most adorned for the massive crowd gatherings. It is one of the most visually striking rituals around Kerala, yet in reality, people rarely see or choose not to bother, what goes behind the scenes as a preparation.

Elephants are chained throughout the day with very limited to no movement space, poorly fed, brutalised using weapons like bull hooks and long polls with poking spikes, mostly kept in solitary, and they undergo a torturous training where they are tied up and beaten for several days to weeks until they obey the mahouts command. Many, if observed closely, have poorly treated wounds on their bodies, blood strains around their ankles, tears oozing from their eyes, and some are even blind and never treated. These prolonged abuses affect both the physical and mental health causing severe stress to these magnificent creatures, all for the sake of human entertainment and blessing ceremonies.

Elephants in the wild are highly intelligent, social animals with complex emotional lives. In the wild, they live in close-knit family groups, travel long distances every day, forage for a wide variety of vegetation, and rely heavily on social bonding for survival and well-being. Adult elephants can walk up to 20–30 km a day, communicate through low-

frequency sounds, and display strong memory. Confinement, isolation, loud noises, and unnatural routines directly contradict their natural ecology and behaviour. Such conditions often lead to psychological distress, explaining why captive temple elephants frequently exhibit signs of trauma and unpredictability.

The tradition of keeping elephants in temples dates back a long time. However, the actual period when temples started associating themselves with elephants remains unclear. Traditionally, elephants were kept to carry water from river to bath deity, stood only for auspicious hours and were otherwise allowed to roam freely in the forest areas associated with temples. With changing times, the temples lost its forest area, and the source of water changed. Over time and the ever changing various cultural norms, they started exploiting elephants by training them to bless the devotees in return for money and food.

The beliefs and practices differ from state to state. In Kerala, elephants have become almost an essential part of major festivals and daily worship. One of the largest gathering includes Thrissur Pooram, placing the elephants as the centre of the celebration. By contrast, temples in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka traditionally keep mostly female elephants for blessings and rituals as the males can be problematic during their musth. In Tamil Nadu, famous temples

