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Superstitions of space age

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One normally associates superstitions with age-old beliefs. Ideas and rituals from the bygone days are followed even today, when they have lost relevance in modern day living and, also in spite of evidence that vitiates those beliefs. But human societies, despite progress of science and technology, do get attracted to bizarre new concepts even though there is no hard evidence for them. Here we look at two such concepts, which owe their origin to the modern space age. I came across them through frequently asked questions.
I am often asked whether the flying saucers exist and whether they bring extraterrestrials to our planet. Indeed, the way the questioner puts the question, it is clear that he or she believes the answer to these questions to be 'yes' and the purpose of the questioner is simply to get additional corroboration from me.
The idea of flying saucers in its modern form seems to have originated with Kenneth Arnold, an American businessman. On June 24, 1947, while flying his aeroplane near Mount Rainier in the state of Washington, he reportedly saw saucer-like objects flying in the sky.
His announcement generated considerable excitement and led to more such sightings being reported in the press.
The witnesses claimed to have seen not only such alien looking spacecraft but also, in some cases, aliens too. As a reaction to these claims, the US government appointed committees of experts, including scientists, to carry out investigations into them. Project Sign in 1948, Project Grudge in 1949 and Project Bluebook in 1952 were the major studies of the claimed incidents. The last of these continued until 1969 when it was finally wound up.
What have been the results of these findings? The bottomline was that there was no credible claim of alien visit in any of the flying saucer incidents. If, whatever was seen was called an 'unidentified flying object' or a UFO, then the possibilities of what a UFO really was turned out to be one of the following kind. Bright objects like Venus or Jupiter, some comet or asteroid or a meteor, when seen near the horizon were often mistaken for alien spacecraft. In some cases, the UFO was a genuine craft, but not alien.
Since the growth of space technology on earth, several man-made spacecraft or balloons have been mistaken for flying saucers. There was also the possibility in some cases that the witnesses were unreliable, being prone to hallucinations or the mental urge to be 'famous' somehow, even if it involved making false claims. In an excellent book, The

UFOs Explained, journalist Phillip Klass narrates investigations into several UFO incidents and solves their mystery. Alas, all those interesting cases end up having a down-to-earth interpretation, requiring no extraterrestrials!

Yet the media continue to pump up any UFO-related news item. Because people want to believe in visiting extraterrestrials, the media must cater to them by generating sufficient 'news' on UFOs. However, big rewards offered for presenting hard evidence establishing that the ETs had been here, have so far gone unclaimed.

My second example is the notorious Bermuda Triangle. It is a triangle largely covering the waters of the Atlantic, having its vertices in Florida, Puerto Rico and Bermuda. The reason for its attaining notoriety is the book by Charles Berlitz with the same name, in which the author has narrated a series of strange events, which are supposed to have happened in the triangle area. These involve planes vanishing, ships sinking, clocks standing still, people disappearing and so on, all in an inexplicable fashion. The author's style is gripping and the reader is left with the firm impression that something uncanny is happening here. Is it because of some strange natural forces? Is space-time structure playing tricks? Or are aliens interfering in the Earth's normal environment?

Again, when scientific approach is brought in to examine these events the mist of mystery thins out. According to Lawrence Kusche, a librarian from Arizona, who studied the events on site, the original descriptions are either wrong or misleading and when checked against facts, there is nothing uncanny to explain. Events shorn of their overstated descriptions are not that unusual. Nevertheless, while overseas, the triangle has lost most of its mystique, in India it continues to generate curiosity and superstitious awe. Beliefs in the uncanny nature of the Bermuda Triangle and in UFOs containing ETs, are thus examples of space age superstitions.

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