



Myths & Beliefs in Tribal & Rural India



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Authors

Professor Monica Lakhanpaul, UCL Great Ormond Street Institute of Child Health, University College London, London, UK

Hemant Chaturvedi, Research Associate, UCL Great Ormond Street Institute of Child Health, University College London, London, UK

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Background

India's culture is among the oldest in the world. Indians have made significant advances in architecture (e.g., [the Taj Mahal](#)), mathematics (the [invention of zero](#)), and medicine ([Ayurveda](#)). Today, India is a highly diverse country, with more than 1.3 billion people, making it the second most populous nation after China.¹ Different regions have their own distinct cultures, languages, religions, cuisines, and artistic traditions—these are just some of the diverse aspects of Indian culture.

India has the largest employment scheme—the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)—a national rural and urban health mission (NRUHM) serving health facilities across India, and Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), which provide supplements, vaccinations, pre-school education, and counselling support to children under five. Under its umbrella, it also includes the largest food distribution programme, the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, as well as numerous social protection schemes for underprivileged groups such as vulnerable children and women.²

Despite all efforts by the government, India is still struggling with poverty, lack of education, inadequate healthcare facilities, and, among these challenges, the overall development of children. Additionally, many myths and beliefs remain deeply rooted in different parts of Indian culture, preventing the country from progressing as a unified developing nation.

Myths and beliefs play a crucial role in shaping the overall development of a child and are passed down through generations by families and communities. Since time immemorial, myths and superstitions—particularly those involving infants and young children—have been a significant concern in India. Different states harbour various beliefs, many of which are followed religiously. These are not only held by the child's family but also by the wider community, influencing the education and healthcare the child receives.

Superstitions surrounding newborns often result in protective rituals, such as tying threads around the neck or waist to ward off the evil eye, or even marking newborns with hot iron rods to ensure their long-term health. In a study on Hindu birth customs, many myths and beliefs were found to directly or indirectly affect children's physical and mental health. For example, a premature birth in the eighth month of pregnancy is sometimes superstitiously linked to a cat having entered the mother's room during a previous confinement.³ Some believe that a child born in this month might die on the eighth day, in the eighth month, the eighth year, or the eighteenth year. As a result, the number “eight” is considered unlucky by some Hindus. In India, when a male child is born, friends and relatives beat a *thali* (a flat bronze utensil similar to a large tray) with a stick. In contrast, when a girl is born, a fan used for winnowing is beaten. The *Jatakarma* ceremony welcomes the newborn into the family. During this ritual, the father touches and smells the child, whispering religious verses (*mantras*) into the baby's ears. This is done to promise the child a safe and comfortable environment. To ward off evil, a small “dot”—often in the shape of “Om”—is drawn behind the baby's ear using *kajal*, a carbon-based eye cosmetic.⁴

Methodology

Conducting secondary research to critically identify the populations in the districts of Rajasthan states in India that majorly follow myths and beliefs. The researcher also had informal discussions with mothers with children < 5 and community leaders who often engage with these myths and beliefs in their local communities. The data was collected over the phone with the stakeholders due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The final stakeholders were chosen at random using the random sampling method.

Objectives

The major objective of this photobook report is to share the findings of this fieldwork with primary target groups in government, NGOs, the research community and among photographers and health professionals who are active in designing and planning programmes and policies in order to raise their awareness of health myths and beliefs prevalent in different parts of India . Indian rural and urban communities, religious leaders, local government bodies, local health practitioners and families, especially parents who are primary caretakers of children, are also the target of this book. According to the Indian census data, only 71 % of the Indian population is literate⁵, so this visual photobook is intended as an easy way to share information and create awareness for both literate and illiterate population groups.

¹ CIA World Factbook

² National Portal India

³ <https://adc.bmj.com/content/89/12/1094>

⁴ Gatrad AR, Ray M, Sheikh A Hindu birth customs *Archives of Disease in Childhood* 2004;89:1094-1097.

Case Story 1: Child Burnt with Hot Needle

Daam, Kushalgarh Block, Banswara

When Ramu (name changed) was 10 months old, he frequently fell ill and became very weak. Ramu's parents were extremely worried about his health. They discussed it with their community, who told them their child was suffering from *Rawai* – a condition believed to occur when a child has an abnormally large head and weak limbs, making it difficult for the child to stand or sit properly. Ramu's parents took him to a *Bhopa* (local faith healer) for treatment.

Ritual: The *Bhopa* allegedly burnt Ramu on his lower back with an iron rod as part of the treatment. Ramu's condition became critical and he was admitted to the district hospital in Udaipur city. People from tribal areas often follow blind rituals in the name of treatment. They tend to avoid proper medical care and instead place their trust in such superstitions.



Case Story 2: Child Suffers from Diarrhoea



Village Jalimpura, Sajjangarh Block, Banswara, Rajasthan

When children often suffer from diarrhoea, the community refers to the illness as *Allena*. It is believed to be caused by the evil eye. The community believes that by performing a specific ritual, the child will recover.

Ritual:

They collect local items like wheat, red chillies, an oil lamp (*diya*) made of cow dung, maize, and rice. These items are rotated around the child's head seven times, and then placed at a crossroads (*T-point*). It is believed that the first person to cross over these items will absorb the illness, thus curing the child.

Case Story 3: Aakhadiya – Pregnancy Discomfort

Village Jalimpura, Sajjangarh Block, Banswara, Rajasthan

According to *Bhopa ji*, when a woman reaches the sixth month of pregnancy, she may experience stomach aches, vomiting, anxiety, and tension. This condition is referred to as *Aakhadiya*. He claims that nearly all pregnant women experience this and require treatment.

Ritual:

The *Bhopa* asks for a glass of water from the home, adds red powder to it, and instructs the woman to drink a small amount daily for seven days. He also ties a red thread around her wrist while chanting a *mantra*. The family believes this ritual makes the pregnancy more comfortable. The woman is advised to follow restrictions:

1. Avoid attending weddings and funerals.
2. Avoid oily and non-vegetarian food, coconut, and *urad dal*.
3. Avoid bathing in the river.



These restrictions are lifted during the first Holi after childbirth. At that time, the family offers one goat and two chickens to the *Bhopa*, who then cuts the red thread. (When I spoke to other women, they confirmed undergoing the same ritual and reported feeling more comfortable during their pregnancies. This practice is not limited to tribal areas but is also observed in rural and urban settings.)





Case Story 4: *Nazar Utna* – Protection from the Evil Eye

Jonthari Block, Dungarpur District, Rajasthan

Rekha (name changed) shared that her daughter suddenly stopped eating, which worried her. Her mother believed the child had been affected by the evil eye and suggested a ritual.

Ritual:

Rekha rubbed cotton between her palms, dipped it in pooja oil, and rotated it over her daughter's head while silently chanting her deity's name. She then lit the cotton. If a black liquid dropped from the cotton, it was believed the evil eye was present. Rekha repeated this ritual daily until the black colour faded. Her daughter started eating again.

To test its validity, she tried the same process without rotating the cotton and observed no black liquid. She was convinced the ritual worked.

Case Story 5: *Bhoot Nikalna* (Ghost Removal)

Village Bakanpura, Baran District, Rajasthan

Ram Bharat Sahariya said his 3-year-old daughter was scared at night and frequently ill. Despite hospital treatment, there was no improvement. Neighbours suggested visiting *Baba ji*, who claimed the child was possessed.

Ritual:

Baba ji gave her a *kanda* (amulet) with a *mantra* and advised against cutting her hair for six months. He instructed them to chant a goddess's name daily. After this, the family believed the child recovered.

Case Story 6: Ghost Possession

Village Bakanpura, Baran District, Rajasthan

Dhudha Ram said his 5-year-old son stopped eating and became very weak. After hospital treatment failed, he visited *Baba ji*.

Ritual:

He gave amulets to both the father and son. They believed the child recovered after wearing it.





Case Story 7: *Nazar Utarna* with *Kala Teeka* and Black Thread

Kushalgarh Block, Banswara

Geeta Bai (name changed) believes that placing a *kala tikka*, also called *nazar ka teeka*—a black dot on the forehead—and tying a black thread on the hand or leg will protect the bearer from *nazar* or the evil eye.

Ritual: The tradition of applying *kala tikka* is rooted in fear. It is based on the belief that people are inherently envious and may unknowingly cast an evil eye on a healthy, smiling, happy baby. To ward this off, the black dot and thread act as a protective charm.

Case Story 8: Treatment by Local Faith Healers

Sajjangarh Block, Banswara, Rajasthan

According to *Baba ji*, every Wednesday people would come to him with various health issues, especially fever and child malnourishment.

Ritual: Traditional rural Indian families often consider health a token of divine benevolence and disease a curse or punishment by God. Illness in children is commonly seen as a result of an evil spell or the *evil eye*. Deep-rooted beliefs suggest diseases arise from blood impurities or violation of taboos. Epilepsy, in particular, is believed to result from supernatural forces.

Case Story 9: Children Being Afraid While Sleeping

Block Sajjangarh, Banswara, Rajasthan

Raju, aged 1, from Tandi Badi village, suffers while sleeping in his cot and starts crying. His mother, Kanta, grew concerned and informed her mother-in-law, Kaali, who believed it was due to an unseen force affecting the child during sleep.



Ritual: Kaali instructed Kanta to bring a small earthen pot (*Sarvi*) from the market for 25 rupees. The pot was covered with cow dung cake and placed in a stove to heat until it turned red. Two small pots of water were kept under the cot in a wooden utensil (*karsof*). The heated pot was then held with tongs and turned upside down in the water beneath the cot. It emitted fumes with a sound 5-6 times. This process was repeated 4-5 times. After this ritual, Raju's mother and grandmother believed he would no longer suffer from dreams or cry in his sleep.

Case Story 10: *Tourbadour* – Traditional Genital Treatment

Kushalgarh Block, Banswara, Rajasthan

Arvind, aged 5, from Hathiyadali village, was playing when other children removed his tights. He went crying to his grandmother, Ammu, who noticed that his left testicle was smaller than the right. Fearing future infertility, she sought a traditional remedy.

Ritual: She took Arvind, along with his parents, to a blacksmith in Lohariya village. The blacksmith, who also crafted iron rods and sickles, made a copper wire earring and pierced Arvind's right ear. After two months, the grandmother observed both testicles were of equal size. She returned to the blacksmith, offered coconut, incense, and *kanku*, and removed the earring. The family believed this resolved Arvind's issue.



Case Story 11: *Ahadi* – Twisting of Neck Bone

Ratanmal Village, Banswara, Rajasthan

Ritika, aged 3 months, stopped breastfeeding and kept crying. Her mother informed her husband and mother-in-law. Following local advice, she visited a *Bhagat* in village Kherda.

Ritual: They brought mustard oil worth 20 rupees. The *Bhagat* massaged the child's chest with the oil and asked the family to bring coconut and incense the next day. On the second day, the same ritual was performed. The *Bhagat* broke a coconut in the name of his deity, lit incense, and told the mother to donate 100 rupees willingly. He declared Ritika was now cured and would face no future problems. The mother, Lakshmi, felt relieved and shared the news with others.



Case Story 12: Kukri – Spinal Bone Twist

Village Khajuria, Kushalgarh, Banswara

Sanjay, aged 3, enjoyed playing in the dust, which made household work easier for his parents. But over time, his behaviour changed. He cried constantly and had diarrhoea 8–10 times per day.

Ritual: Kamala, his mother, first took him to a local *jholachap* (unqualified) doctor who gave a drip and injections. The diarrhoea slightly reduced but soon returned. She consulted her father, who examined the child and concluded he had a twisted spine. He massaged the child with mustard oil morning and evening for four days. On the fourth day, he offered a coconut and incense to the village goddess (*Kheda's Maa*). Kamala then returned home, confident that her son had recovered.

Case Story 13: Myths About COVID-19 Vaccination

Banswara and Pali, Rajasthan

According to the newspaper *Dainik Bhaskar*, tribal people believed COVID-19 vaccines would lead to death or infertility. They thought different vaccines were given to young and old: young people would become impotent, and older people would die soon after vaccination.

Ritual: In Pali, local leaders discouraged people from taking vaccines. Communities began refusing entry to frontline health workers. Protective rituals included:

- Carrying 2–3 neem leaves when pregnant women left home.
- Burning the neem leaves upon returning to remove any evil eye.

Rotating red chillies over a child's head and burning them to ashes to ward off illness caused by the evil eye.



Case Story 14: Treatment of Jaundice Through *Jhada* Jaipur City

Seema experienced high fever, vomiting, and yellowing of skin and eyes. Doctors diagnosed her with jaundice and prescribed a 10-day course of medicine. She found no relief, so completed the treatment and visited again. Still unsatisfied, she turned to a *Baba* suggested by her aunt.

Ritual: The *Baba* used a bronze bowl with pure water, placed it near her head, and stirred it with green grass while chanting mantras. He instructed her to repeat the ritual twice daily. By the seventh day, Seema claimed she had fully recovered and described it as a miracle.



Case Story 15: *Nazar* Ritual Using Red Chillies, Salt, and Mustard Seeds

Chaksu, Jaipur Rural City

Renu, aged 3, was praised by many guests at her birthday party. Later that day, she began feeling unwell—numbness, nausea, and uneasiness. Her mother was alarmed and consulted her mother-in-law, Kamlesh.

Ritual: Kamlesh suggested a *nazar utarna* ritual. Renu sat facing east with knees bent and palms up. The performer held red chillies, mustard seeds, and salt in crossed fists. The fists were moved from head to toe and back, first in crossing motion and then in opposite circular movements. The ritual was performed 7 times while chanting: “May the evil eye cast upon this child be removed and may no harm come.” Renu’s symptoms disappeared within an hour.